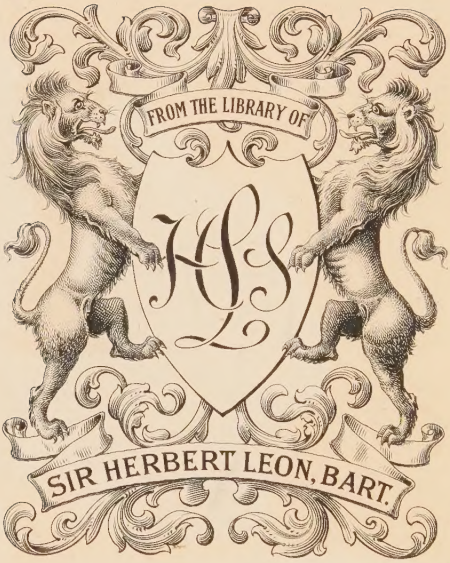
FROM THE LIBRARY OF
HLS
SIR HERBERT LEON, BART.

Alice Hastings
-with the author's love.

THE CLOVEN FOOT

1880

A Novel

BY THE AUTHOR OF

'LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET'

ETC. ETC. ETC.

In Three Volumes

VOL. I

LONDON

JOHN AND ROBERT MAXWELL

MILTON HOUSE, SHOE LANE, FLEET STREET

[*All rights reserved.*]

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2025

https://archive.org/details/clovenfootnovel00brad_0

CONTENTS TO VOL. I.

CHAP.		PAGE
I.	THE HEIR PRESUMPTIVE	1
II.	JASPER TREVERTON'S WILL	32
III.	A MYSTERIOUS VISITOR	46
IV.	LA CHICOT	69
V.	A DISAPPOINTED LOVER	100
VI.	LA CHICOT HAS HER OWN WAY	115
VII.	'A LITTLE WHILE SUCH LIPS AS THINE TO KISS'	138
VIII.	DAYS THAT ARE OVER, DREAMS THAT ARE DONE	180
IX.	'AND ART THOU COME! AND ART THOU TRUE!'	206
X.	ENGAGED	226
XI.	NO TROUSSEAU	247
XII.	AN ILL-OMENED WEDDING	260
XIII.	THE SETTLEMENT	286
XIV.	'YOU HAVE BUT TO SAY THE WORD'	294

THE CLOVEN FOOT.

CHAPTER I.

THE HEIR PRESUMPTIVE.

THE air was thick with falling snow, and the country side looked a formless mass of chilly whiteness, as the south-western mail train carried John Treverton on a lonely midnight journey. There were not many people in the train on that bleak night, and Mr. Treverton had a second-class compartment to himself.

He had tried to sleep, but had failed ignominiously in the endeavour, waking with a start, after five minutes' doze, and remaining broad awake for an hour at a time pondering upon the perplexities of

his life, and hating himself for the follies that had made it what it was. It had been a very hard life of late, for the world had gone ill with John Treverton. He had begun his career with a small fortune and a commission in a crack regiment, and, after wasting his patrimony and selling his commission, he was now a gentleman at large, living as best he might, no one but himself knew how.

He was going to a quiet village in Devonshire, a far away nook under the shadow of Dartmoor, in obedience to a telegram that told him a rich kinsman was dying, and summoned him to the death bed. The day had been when he hoped to inherit this kinsman's property; not because the old man had ever cared for him, but because he, John, was the only relative Jasper Treverton had in the world; but that hope had vanished when the lonely old bachelor adopted an orphan girl to whom he was reported to have attached himself strongly. The *ci-devant* Captain had never seen this young person, and it is not to be supposed that he cherished very kindly feelings towards her. He had made up his mind that she was a deep and designing creature, who would, of

course, play her cards in such a manner as to induce old Jasper Treverton to leave her everything.

'He never bore me or mine much goodwill,' John Treverton said to himself, 'but he might have left his money to me for want of any one else to leave it to, if it hadn't been for this girl.'

During almost the whole of that dreary night journey he was meditating on this subject, half inclined to be angry with himself for having taken such useless trouble for the sake of a man who was not likely to leave him sixpence.

He was not an utterly bad fellow, this John Treverton, though his better and purer feelings had been a good deal blunted by rough contact with the world. He had a frank winning manner, and a handsome face, a face which had won him the love of more than one woman, with little profit to himself. He was a man of no strong principle, and with a self-indulgent nature, that had led him into wrong-doing very often during the last ten years of his life. He had an easy temper, a habit of looking at the pleasanter side of things, so long as there was any pleasantness in them, and a chronic avoidance of all serious thought.

qualities which do not serve to make up a strong character. But the charm of his manner was none the less because of this latent weakness of character, and he was better liked than many better men.

The train stopped at a little rustic station, forty miles westward of Exeter, about an hour after midnight, a dreary building with an open platform, across which the wind blew and the snow drifted as John Treverton alighted, the one solitary passenger to be deposited at this out of the way place. He knew that the house to which he had to go was some miles from the station, and he applied himself at once to the sleepy stationmaster to ascertain if there were any possibility of procuring a conveyance at that time of night.

'There's a gig waiting for a gentleman from London,' the man answered, stifling a yawn, 'I suppose you are the party, sir.'

'A gig from Treverton Manor?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Thanks, yes, I am the person that is expected. Civil, at any rate,' John Treverton added to himself, as he walked off to the gig, wrapped to the eyes in

his great coat, and with a railway rug across his shoulder.

He found a gig, with a rough looking individual of the gardener species waiting for him in the snow.

'Here I am, my man,' he cried cheerily, 'have you been waiting long?'

'No, sir. Miss Malcolm said as how you'd come by this train.'

'Miss Malcolm sent you for me then?'

'Yes, sir.'

'And how is Mr. Treverton, to-night?'

'Mortal bad, sir. The doctors say as th' old gentleman hasn't many hours to live. And Miss Malcolm, she says to me, "Jacob, you're to drive home as fast as th' horse can go, for papa is very anxious to see Mr. John before he dies." She allus calls the old gentleman papa, you see, sir, he having adopted of her ten years ago, and brought her up as his own daughter like, ever since.'

They had jolted over the uneven stones of a narrow street, the high street of a small settlement which evidently called itself a town, for here, at a point where two narrow lanes branched off from the

central thoroughfare, there stood a dilapidated old building of the town hall species, and a vaulted market-place with iron railings, and closely-locked gates shutting in emptiness. John Treverton perceived dimly through the winter darkness an old stone church, and at least three Methodist chapels. Then, all in a moment, the town was gone, and the gig was rattling along a Devonshire lane, between high banks and still higher hedges, above which rose a world of hill and moor, that melted far off into the midnight sky.

'And your master is very fond of this young lady, Miss Malcolm?' John Treverton inquired presently, when the horse, after rattling along for a mile and a half at a tremendous pace, was slowly climbing a hill which seemed to lead nowhere in particular, for one could hardly imagine any definite end or aim in a lane that went undulating like a snake amidst a chaos of hills.

'Oncommon, sir. You see, she's about the only thing he has ever cared for.'

'Is she as much liked by other people?'

'Well, yes, sir, in a general way Miss Malcolm is

pretty well liked, but there is some as think her proud—think her a little set up as you may say, by Mr. Treverton's making so much of her. She's not one to make friends very easy; the young ladies in the village, Squire Carew's daughters, and such like, haven't taken to her as much as they might have done. I've heard my wife—as has been parlour-maid at the Manor for the last twenty years—say as much many a time. But Miss Malcolm is a pleasant spoken young lady, for all that, to those she likes, and my Susan has had no fault to find with her. You see all of us has our peculiarities, sir, and it ain't to be supposed as Miss Malcolm would be without hers,' the man concluded in an argumentative tone.

'Humph,' muttered John Treverton, 'a stuck-up young lady, I daresay—and a deep one into the bargain. Did you ever hear who she was—what her position was, and so on—when my cousin Jasper adopted her?' he asked aloud.

'No, sir. Mr. Treverton has kept that oncommon close. He'd been away from the Manor a twelve-month when he brought her home without a word of

warning to any one in the house, and told his old housekeeper, as how he'd adopted this little girl—who was an orphan—the daughter of an old friend of his, and that's all he ever said about her from that time to this. Miss Malcolm was about seven or eight year old at that time, as pretty a little girl as you could see—and she has grown up to be a beautiful young woman.'

Beautiful. Oh, this artful young person was beautiful, was she? John Treverton determined that her good looks should have no influence upon his opinions.

The man was quite willing to talk, but his companion asked no more questions. He felt indeed that he had already asked more than he was warranted in asking, and felt a little ashamed of himself for having done so. The rest of the drive therefore, passed for the most part in silence. The journey had seemed long to John Treverton, partly because of his own impatience, partly on account of the numerous ups and downs of that everlasting lane, but it was little more than half an hour after leaving the station when they entered a village

street where there was not a glimmer of light at this hour, except one solitary lamp shining feebly before the door of the general shop and post office. This was the village of Hazlehurst, near which Hazlehurst Manor House was situated. They drove to the end of this quiet street and along a high road bordered by tall elms, which looked black against the night sky, till they came to a pair of great iron gates.

The man handed the reins to his companion, and then dismounted and opened these gates. John Treverton drove slowly into a winding carriage drive that led up to the house, a great red brick mansion with many long narrow windows, and a massive carved stone shell over the door, which was approached on each side by a flight of broad stone steps.

There was light enough from the stars for John Treverton to see all this as he drove slowly up to the hall door. His coming had evidently been awaited anxiously, as the door was opened before he had alighted from the gig, and an old man-servant peered out into the night. He opened the door

wide when he saw John Treverton. The gardener—or groom, whichever he might happen to be—led the gig slowly away to a gate at the side of the house, opening into a stable yard. John Treverton went into the hall, which looked very bright and cheerful after his dreary drive, a great square hall hung with family portraits and old armour, and with crimson sheep-skins and tawny hides of savage beasts lying about on the black and white marble pavement. There was a roomy old fire-place on one side of this hall, with a great fire burning in it, a fire which was welcome as meat and drink to a traveller this cold night. There were ponderous carved oak chairs with dark red velvet cushions, looking more comfortable and better adapted for the repose of the human frame than such chairs are wont to be, and at the end of the hall there was a great antique buffet adorned with curious bowls and bottle-shaped jars in Oriental China.

John Treverton had time to see these things as he sat before the fire with his long legs stretched out upon the hearth, while the old servant went to announce his arrival to Miss Malcolm.

'A pleasant old place,' he said to himself. 'And to think of my never having seen it before, thanks to my father's folly in having quarrelled with old Jasper Treverton, and never having taken the trouble to heal the breach, as he might have done, I daresay, with some slight exercise of diplomacy. I wonder whether the old fellow is very rich. Such a place as this might be kept up on a couple of thousand a year, but I have a notion that Jasper Treverton has six times as much as that.'

The old butler came downstairs in about five minutes to say that Miss Malcolm would be pleased to see Mr. Treverton, if he liked. His master had fallen asleep, and was sleeping more peacefully than he had done for some time.

John Treverton followed the man up a broad staircase with massive oak bannisters. Here, as in the hall, there were family portraits on the walls, and armour and old china in every available corner. At the top of this staircase was a gallery, lighted by a lantern in the roof, and with numerous doors opening out of it. The butler opened one of these

doors and ushered John Treverton into a bright looking lamp-lit sitting room, with panelled walls. A heavy green damask curtain hung before a door opening into an adjoining room. The mantelpiece was high, and exquisitely carved with flowers and cupids, and was ornamented by a row of egg-shell cups and saucers, and the quaintest of oriental teapots. The room had a comfortable home-like look, John Treverton thought—a look that struck him all the more perhaps because he had no settled home of his own, nor had ever known one since his boyhood.

A lady was sitting by the fire, dressed in a dark blue gown, which contrasted wonderfully with the auburn tints of her hair, and the transparent pallor of her complexion. As she rose and turned her face towards John Treverton, he saw that she was, indeed, a very beautiful young woman, and there was something in her beauty which took him a little by surprise, in spite of what he had heard from his companion in the gig.

'Thank God you have come in time, Mr. Treverton,' she said earnestly, an earnestness which

John Treverton was inclined to consider hypocritical. What interest could she have in his arrival? What feeling could there be between them but jealousy?

'I suppose she feels so secure about the old man's will that she can afford to be civil,' he thought as he seated himself by the fireside, after two or three polite commonplaces about his journey.

'There is no hope of my cousin's recovery, I suppose?' he hazarded presently.

'Not the faintest,' Laura Malcolm answered, very sadly. 'The London physician was here for the last time to-day. He has been down every week for the last two months. He said to-day that there would be no occasion for him to come any more; he did not think papa — I have always called your cousin by that name — could live through the night. He has been less restless and troubled since then, and he is now sleeping very quietly. He may linger a little longer than the physician seemed to think likely; but beyond that I have no hope whatever.'

This was said with a quiet, restrained manner

that was more indicative of sorrow than any demonstrative lamentation could have been. There was something almost like despair in the girl's look and tone—a dreary hopelessness—as if there were nothing left for her in life when the friend and protector of her girlhood should be taken from her. John Treverton watched her closely as she sat looking at the fire, with her dark eyes shrouded by their long lashes. Yes, she was very beautiful. That was a fact about which there was no possibility of doubt. Those large hazel eyes alone would have given a charm to the plainest face, and in this face there was no fault to be redeemed.

'You seem to be much attached to my cousin, Miss Malcolm,' Mr. Treverton said presently.

'I love him dearly,' she answered, looking up at him with those deep dark eyes, which had a melancholy expression to-night. 'I have had no one else to care for since I was quite a child; and he has been very good to me. I should be something worse than ungrateful if I did not love him as I do.'

'And yet your life must have been a trying one, as the sole companion of an old man of Jasper Treverton's eccentric temper. I speak of him as I have heard him described by my father. You must have found existence with him rather troublesome, now and then, I should think.'

'I very soon learnt to understand him, and to bear all the little changes in his humour. I knew that his heart was noble.'

'Humph,' thought John Treverton, 'women can do these things better than men. I couldn't stand being shut up with a crusty old fellow for a week.'

And after having made this reflection, he thought that no doubt Miss Malcolm was of the usual type of sycophants and interlopers, able to endure anything in the present for the chance of a stupendous advantage in the future, able to wait for the fruition of her hopes with a dull, grovelling patience.

'This appearance of grief is all put on, of course,' he said to himself. 'I am not going to think any better of her because she has fine eyes.'

They sat for a little time in silence, Laura Malcolm seeming quite absorbed by her own

thoughts, and in no way disturbed by the presence of John Treverton. It was a proud face which he looked at every now and then so thoughtfully, not a loveable face by any means, in spite of its beauty. There was a coldness of expression, a self-contained air about Miss Malcolm which her new acquaintance was inclined to dislike. He had come to that house prepared to think unfavourably of her, had come there indeed with a settled dislike to her.

'I think it is to you I am indebted for the telegram that summoned me here?' he said by-and-bye.

'Oh, no, not to me directly. It was your cousin's wish that you should be sent for—a wish he only expressed on Monday, though I had asked him many times if he would not like to see you, his only surviving relative. Had I known your address, or where a letter would reach you, I think I should have ventured to ask you to come down without his permission, but I had no knowledge of this.'

'And it was only the day before yesterday that my cousin spoke of me for the first time?'

'Only the day before yesterday. On every

previous occasion he gave me a short, impatient answer, telling me not to worry him, and that he had no wish to see anyone, but on Monday he mentioned your name, and told me he wanted particularly to see you. He had no idea where you were to be found, but he thought a telegram addressed to your father's old lawyer would reach you. I sent the message as he directed.'

'The lawyer had some difficulty in hunting me out, but I lost no time after I got your message. I cannot, of course, pretend any attachment to a man whom I never saw in my life, but I am pleased that Jasper Treverton should have thought of me at the last, nevertheless. I am here to testify my respect for him, in a perfectly independent character, having not the faintest expectation of inheriting one shilling of his wealth.'

'I don't know why you should not expect to inherit his estate, Mr. Treverton.' Laura Malcolm answered, quietly. 'To whom else should he leave it, if not to you?'

John Treverton thought this question a piece of gratuitous hypocrisy.

'Why to you, of course,' he replied, 'his adopted daughter, who have earned his favour by years of patient submission to all his whims and fancies. Surely you must be quite aware of his intentions upon this point, Miss Malcolm, and this affected ignorance of the subject is intended to hoodwink me.'

'I am sorry you should think so badly of me, Mr. Treverton. I do not know how your cousin has disposed of his money, but I do know that none of it has been left to me.'

'How do you know that?'

'I have been assured of it by his own lips, not once, but many times. When he first adopted me he made a vow that he would leave me no part of his wealth. He had been treated with falsehood and ingratitude by those he had loved, and had found out their mercenary feelings about him. This had soured him a good deal, and he was determined—when he took me under his care out of motives of the purest charity—that he would have one person about him who should love him for his own sake, or not pretend to love him at all. He took an oath

to this effect on the night he first brought me home to this house, and fully explained the meaning of that oath to me, though I was quite a child at that time. "I have had toadies and sycophants about me, Laura," he said, "until I have come to distrust every smiling face. Your smiles shall be true, my dear, for you shall have no motive for falsehood." On my eighteenth birthday he placed in trust six thousand pounds for my benefit, in order that his death should not leave me unprovided for, but he took occasion at the same time to remind me that this gift was all I must ever expect at his hands.'

John Treverton heard this with a quickened breath, and a new life and eagerness in the expression of his face. The aspect of affairs was quite altered by the fact of this oath sworn long ago by the eccentric old man. He must leave his money to some one. What if he should, indeed, leave it to him, John Treverton?

For some few minutes his heart beat high with a new hope, and then sank again suddenly. Was it not much more likely that Jasper Treverton would

find some means of evading the letter of his vow, for the benefit of a beloved adopted daughter, than that he should bequeath his fortune to a kinsman who was a stranger to him?

'Don't let me be a fool,' John Treverton said to himself, 'there's not the faintest chance of any such luck for me, and I daresay this girl knows as much, though she is artful enough to pretend complete ignorance of the old man's designs.'

The butler came in presently to announce that supper was ready for Mr. Treverton in the dining-room below. He went downstairs in answer to this summons, after begging Miss Malcolm to send for him the moment the invalid awoke.

The dining-room was handsomely furnished with massive sideboard and chairs of carved oak, the long narrow windows draped with dark red velvet. There was a fine old Venetian glass over the sideboard, and a smaller circular mirror above the old inlaid bureau that occupied the space between the windows opposite. There were a few good cabinet pictures of the Dutch school on the panelled walls, and a pair of fine blue and white Delft jars on the high carved oak

chimney-piece. A wood fire burned cheerily in the wide grate, and the small round table on which the traveller's supper had been laid was wheeled close to the edge of the Turkey hearthrug, and had a very comfortable appearance in the eyes of Mr. John Treverton as he seated himself in one of the capacious oak chairs.

In his disturbed state of mind he had little inclination to eat, though the cook had prepared a cozy supper that might have tempted an Anchorite; but he did justice to a bottle of excellent claret, and sat for some time, sipping his wine and looking about him thoughtfully, now at the curious old silver tankards and rose-water dishes on the sideboard, now at the Cuyps and Ostades on the dark oak walls. To whom would all these things belong when Jasper Treverton was no more? Throughout the house there were indications of wealth that inspired an almost savage longing in this man's mind. What a changed life his would be if he should inherit only half of his cousin's possessions. He thought, with a weary sigh, of the wretched hand to mouth existence that he had led of late years, and then thought of the things

that he would do if he came in for any share of the old man's money. He sat meditating thus until the servant came to tell him that Mr. Treverton was awake, and had asked to see him. He followed the man back to the study, where he had found Miss Malcolm. The room was empty now, but the curtain was drawn aside from the door of communication, and he passed through this into Jasper Treverton's bed-room.

Laura Malcolm was seated at the bedside, but she rose as John entered, and slipped quietly away by another door, leaving him alone with his cousin.

'Sit down, John,' the old man said in a feeble voice, pointing to the empty chair by the bedside.

'It is rather late in the day for us two to meet,' he went on, after a brief pause, 'but perhaps it is better for us to see each other once before I die. I won't speak of your father's quarrel with me. You know all about that, I daresay. We were both in the wrong, very likely; but it has long been too late to undo that. I loved him once, God knows!—yes, there was a day when I loved Richard Treverton dearly.'

'I have heard him say as much, sir,' John answered in subdued tones. 'I regret that he should have quarrelled with you; I regret much more that he should not have sought a reconciliation.'

'Your father was always a proud man, John. Perhaps I liked him all the better for that. Most men in his position would have courted me for the sake of my money. He never did that.'

'It was not in him to do it, sir. He had his faults, I have no doubt, but a sordid nature was not one of them.'

'I know that,' answered Jasper Treverton, 'nor have you ever sought me out, John, or tried to worm yourself into my favour. Yet, I suppose, you know that you are my sole surviving relative.'

'Yes, sir, I am quite aware of that.'

'And you have left me in peace, and have been content to take your chance. Well, you will find yourself none the worse off for having respected yourself and not worried me.'

John Treverton's face flushed, and the beating of his heart quickened again, as it had quickened when Laura Malcolm told him of his kinsman's vow.

'My death will make you a rich man,' returned Jasper, always speaking with a painful effort, and in so low a voice that John was obliged to bend over his pillow in order to hear him, 'on one condition—a condition which I do not think you will find it difficult to comply with.'

'You are very good sir,' faltered the young man, almost too agitated to speak. 'Believe me, I had no expectation of this.'

'I daresay not,' replied the other. 'I took a foolish oath some years ago, and bound myself not to leave my fortune to the only creature I really love. To whom else should I leave it then, but to you—my next of kin? I know nothing against you. I have lived too remote from the world to hear its scandals; and I know not whether you have won good or evil repute among your fellow men; but I do know that you are the son of a man I once loved, and that it will be in your power to carry out my wishes in the spirit, if not in the letter. The rest I trust to Providence.'

After having said this the dying man lay back upon the pillows, and remained silent for some

minutes, resting after the exertion involved in so long a speech. John Treverton waited for him to speak again—waited with a tumultuous sense of gladness in his breast, looking round the room now and then. It was a spacious apartment with handsome antique furniture, and panelled walls hung with old pictures, like those in the dining-room below. Dark green velvet curtains were closely drawn before the three lofty windows, and in the spaces between them there were curious old cabinets of carved ebony, inlaid with silver. John Treverton looked at all these things, which seemed to be his already, after what the dying man had said to him. How different from the home he had left, the shabby-genteel London lodging, with its tawdry finery, and decrepit chairs and tables.

'What do you think of my adopted daughter, John Treverton?' the old man asked presently, turning his dim eyes towards his cousin.

The younger man hesitated a little before replying. The question had taken him by surprise. His thoughts had been far away from Laura Malcolm.

'I think she is very handsome, sir,' he said, 'and I daresay she is amiable; but I really have had very

little opportunity of forming any opinion about the young lady.'

'No, you have seen nothing of her as yet. You will like her better when you come to know her. I cannot doubt that. Her father and I were warm friends, once upon a time. We were at Oxford together, and travelled a good deal in Spain and Italy together, and loved each other well enough, I believe, till circumstances parted us. I need have no shame in owning the cause of our parting now. We loved the same woman, and Stephen Malcolm won her. I thought—whether rightly or wrongly—that I had not been fairly treated in the matter, and Stephen and I parted, never to meet as friends again till Stephen was on his death-bed. The lady jilted him after all, and he did not marry until some years later. When I heard of him next he was in reduced circumstances. I sought him out, found him in a pitiable condition and adopted his daughter—an only child—doubly orphaned. I cannot tell you how dear she soon became to me, but I had made an oath I would leave her nothing, and I have not broken that oath, dearly as I love her.'

'But you have made some provision for her future, sir!'

'Yes, I have striven to provide for her future. God grant it may be a happy one. And now call my servant, if you please, John. I have talked a great deal too much as it is.'

'Only one word before I call the man. Let me tell you, sir, that I am grateful,' said John Treverton, kneeling down beside the bed, and taking the old man's wasted hand in his.

'Prove it when I am gone, John, by trying to carry out my wishes. And now good-night. You had better go to bed.'

'Will you allow me to sit with you for the rest of the night, sir? I have not the least inclination to sleep.'

'No, no, there would be no use in your sitting up. If I am well enough to see you again in the morning I will do so. Till then, good-bye.'

The old man's tone was decisive. John Treverton went out of the room by a door that opened on the gallery. Here he found Jasper Treverton's valet, a grave-looking, grey-haired man,

dosing upon a window seat. He told this man that he was wanted in the sick room, and then went to the study.

Miss Malcolm was still there, sitting in a thoughtful attitude, looking at the fire.

'What do you think of him?' she asked, looking up suddenly, as John Treverton entered the room.

'He does not seem to me so ill as I expected to see him from your account. He has spoken to me with perfect clearness.'

'I am very glad of that. He seemed a good deal better after that long sleep. I will ring for Trimmer to show you your room, Mr. Treverton.'

'Are you not going to bed yourself, Miss Malcolm? It is nearly three o'clock.'

'No. I cannot sleep during this time of suspense. Besides, he may want me at any moment. I shall lie down on that sofa, perhaps, a little before morning.'

'Have you been keeping watch like this many nights?'

'For more than a week; but I am not tired. I think when the mind is so anxious the body has no capability of feeling fatigue.'

'You will find the reaction very severe by-and-bye, I fear,' Mr. Treverton replied; and Trimmer, the old butler, having appeared by this time with a candle, he wished Miss Malcolm good-night.

The room to which Trimmer led John Treverton was on the other side of the house—a large room with a comfortable fire blazing on the hearth, and reflecting itself in a border of old Dutch tiles. Late as it was, Mr. Treverton sat by the fire thinking for a long time before he went to bed, and even when he did lie down under the shadow of the damask curtains that shrouded the gloomy-looking fourpost bed, sleep kept aloof from him. His mind was busy with thoughts of triumph and delight. Innumerable schemes for the future—selfish ones for the most part—crowded and jostled each other in his brain. It was a feverish night altogether—a night which left him unrefreshed and haggard when the cold wintry light came

creeping in between the window curtains, and a great clock in the stable-yard struck eight.

A countryfied-looking young man, a subordinate of the butler's, brought the visitor his shaving water, and, on being questioned, informed him that Mr. Treverton the elder had passed a restless night, and was worse that morning.

John Treverton dressed quickly, and went straight to the study next the invalid's room. He found Laura Malcolm there, looking very wan and pale after her night's watching. She confirmed the young man's statement. Jasper Treverton was much worse. His mind had wandered towards daybreak, and he now seemed to recognise no one. His old friend the vicar had been with him, and had read the prayers for the sick, but the dying man had been able to take no part in them. The end was very near at hand, Laura feared.

Mr. Treverton stopped with Miss Malcolm a little while, and then wandered down to the dining-room, where he found an excellent breakfast waiting for him in solitary state. He fancied that the old

butler treated him with a peculiar deference, as if aware that he was to be the new master of Treverton Manor. After breakfast he went out into the gardens, which were large, and laid out in an old-fashioned style; straight walks, formal grass plats, and flower beds of geometrical design. John Treverton walked here for some time, smoking his cigar and looking up thoughtfully at the great red brick house with its many windows glittering in the chill January sunshine, and its air of old-world repose.

'It will be the beginning of a new life,' he said to himself; 'I feel myself ten years younger since my interview with the old man last night. Let me see—I shall be thirty on my next birthday. Young enough to begin life afresh — old enough to use wealth wisely.'

CHAPTER II.

JASPER TREVERTON'S WILL.

JASPER TREVERTON lingered nearly a week after the coming of his kinsman—a week that seemed interminable to the expectant heir, who could not help wishing the old man would make a speedy end of it. What use was that last remnant of life to him lying helpless on his bed, restless, weary, and for the greater part of his time delirious. John Treverton saw him for a few minutes once or twice every day, and looked at him with a sympathising and appropriate expression of countenance, and did really feel compassionately towards him; but his busy thoughts pressed forward to the time when he should have the handling of that feeble sufferer's wealth, and should be free to begin that new life, bright glimpses whereof shone upon his roving fancy like visions of paradise.

After six monotonous days, every one of which

was exactly like the other for John Treverton, who smoked his solitary cigar in the wintry garden, and ate his solitary meals in the great dining-room with his mind always filled by that one subject—the inheritance which seemed so nearly within his grasp—the night came upon which Jasper Treverton's feeble hold of life relaxed altogether, and he drifted away to the unknown ocean, with his hand in Laura Malcolm's, and his face turned towards her, with a wan smile upon the faded lips, as he died. After this followed three or four days of wearisome delay, in which the quiet of the darkened rooms seemed intolerable to John Treverton, to whom death was an unfamiliar horror. He avoided the house in these days as much as possible, and spent the greater part of his time in long rambles out into the open country, leaving all the arrangements of the funeral to Mr. Clare, the vicar, who had been Jasper Treverton's closest friend, and a Mr. Sampson, an inhabitant of the village, who had been the dead man's solicitor.

The funeral came at last, a very quiet cere-

monial, in accordance with Jasper Treverton's express desire, and the master of Treverton Manor was laid in the vault where many of his ancestors slept the last long sleep. There was a drizzling rain and a low, lead-coloured sky, beneath which the old churchyard looked unspeakably dismal; but John Treverton's thoughts were far away as he stood by the open grave, while the sublime words of the service fell unheard upon his ear. To-morrow he would be back in London, most likely, with the consciousness of wealth and power, inaugurating that new life which he thought of so eagerly.

He went back to the house, where it was a relief to find the blinds drawn up and the dull grey winter light in the rooms. The will was to be read in the drawing-room—a very handsome room—with white and gold panelling, six long windows, and a fireplace at each end. Here Mr. Sampson, the lawyer, seated himself at a table to read the will, in the presence of Mr. Clare, the vicar, Laura Malcolm, and the upper servants of the Manor-house, who took their places in a little group near the door.

The will was very simply worded. It commenced with some bequests to the old servants, a small annuity to Andrew Trimmer, the butler, and sums varying from fifty to two hundred pounds to the coachmen and women servants. There was a complimentary legacy of a hundred guineas to Thomas Sampson, and a bequest of old plate to Theodore Clare, the vicar. After these things had been duly set forth the testator went on to leave the remainder of his property, real and personal to his cousin, John Treverton, provided the said John Treverton should marry his dearly-beloved adopted daughter, Laura Malcolm, within one year of his decease. The estate was to be held in trust during this interval by Theodore Clare and Thomas Sampson, together with all moneys therefrom arising. In the event of this marriage not taking place within the said time, the whole of the estate was to pass into the hands of the said Theodore Clare and the said Thomas Sampson, in trust for the erection of a hospital in the adjacent market town of Beechampton.

Miss Malcolm looked up with a startled

expression as this strange bequest was read. John Treverton's face assumed a sudden pallor that was by no means flattering to the lady whose fate was involved in the singular condition which attached to his inheritance. The situation was an awkward one for both. Laura rose directly the reading of the will was finished, and left the room without a word. The servants retired immediately after, and John Treverton was left alone with the vicar and the lawyer.

'Allow me to congratulate you, Mr. Treverton,' said Thomas Sampson, folding up the will, and coming to the fireplace by which John Treverton was seated: 'you will find yourself a very rich man.'

'A twelvemonth hence, Mr. Sampson,' the other answered doubtfully, 'always provided that Miss Malcolm is willing to accept me for her husband, which she may not be.'

'She will scarcely fly in the face of her adopted father's desire, Mr. Treverton.'

'I don't know about that. A woman seldom cares for a husband of any one else's choosing. I don't want to look a gift horse in the mouth, or to

seem ungrateful to my cousin Jasper, from whom I entertained no expectations whatever a week or so ago; but I cannot help thinking he would have done better by dividing his property between Miss Malcolm and myself, leaving us both free.'

He spoke in a slow, meditative way, and he was pale to the very lips. There was no appearance of triumph or gladness—only an anxious, disappointed expression, which made his handsome face look strangely worn and haggard.

'There are not many men who would think Laura Malcolm an encumbrance to any fortune, Mr. Treverton,' said Mr. Clare. 'I think you will be happier in the possession of such a wife than in the enjoyment of your cousin's wealth, large as it is.'

'In the event of the lady's accepting me as her husband,' John Treverton again interposed doubtfully.

'You have an interval of a twelvemonth in which to win her,' replied the vicar, 'and things will go hard with you if you fail. I think I can answer for the fact that Miss Malcolm's

affections are disengaged. Of course she, like yourself, is a little startled by the eccentricity of this condition. The position is much more embarrassing for her than for you.'

John Treverton did not reply to this remark, but there was a very blank look in his face as he stood by the fire listening to the vicar's and the lawyer's praises of his departed kinsman.

'Will Miss Malcolm continue to occupy this house?' he asked presently.

'I scarcely know what her wishes may be,' replied Mr. Clare, 'but I think it would be well if the house were placed at her disposal. I suppose that we as trustees would have power to make her such an offer, Mr. Sampson, with Mr. Treverton's concurrence.'

'Of course.'

'I concur most heartily in any arrangement that may be agreeable to the young lady,' John Treverton said, in rather a mechanical way. 'I suppose there is nothing further to detain me here. I can go back to town to-morrow.'

'Wouldn't you like to go over the estate

before you return to London, Mr. Treverton?' asked Thomas Sampson. 'It would be just as well for you to see the extent of a property that is pretty sure to be your own. If you don't mind taking things in a plain way, I should be very much pleased by your spending a week or so at my house. There's no one knows the estate better than I do, and I can show you every rood of it.'

'You are very kind, Mr. Sampson. I shall be glad to accept your hospitality.'

'That's what I call friendly. When will you come over to us? This evening? We are all to dine together, I believe. Why shouldn't you go home with me after dinner? Your presence here can only embarrass Miss Malcolm.'

Having accepted the lawyer's invitation, John Treverton did not care how soon his visit took place, so it was agreed that he should walk over to 'The Laurels' with Mr. Sampson that evening after dinner. But before he went it would be necessary to take some kind of farewell of Laura Malcolm, and the idea of this was now painfully embarrassing to him. It was a thing that must

be done, however, and it would be well that it should be done at a seasonable hour; so in the twilight, before dinner, he went up to the study, which he knew was Miss Malcolm's favourite room, and found her there with an open book lying on her lap and a small tea-tray on the table by her side.

She looked up at him without any appearance of confusion, but with a very pale, sad face. He seated himself opposite her, and it was some moments before he could find words for the simple announcement he had to make. That calm, beautiful face, turned towards him with a grave expectant look, embarrassed him more than he could have imagined possible.

'I have accepted an invitation from Mr. Sampson to spend a few days with him before I go back to town, and I have come to bid you good-bye, Miss Malcolm,' he said at last. 'I fancied that at such a time as this it would be pleasanter for you to feel yourself quite alone.'

'You are very good. I do not suppose I shall stay here many days.'

'I hope you will stay here altogether. Mr. Sampson and Mr. Clare, the trustees, wish it very much. I do not think that I have much power in the affair; but believe me it is my earnest desire that you should not be in a hurry to leave your old home.'

'You are very good. I do not think I could stay here alone in this dear old house, where I have been so happy. I know some respectable people in the village who let lodgings. I think I would rather remove to their house as soon as my trunks are packed. I have plenty to live upon, you know, Mr. Treverton. The six thousand pounds your cousin gave me yields an income of over two hundred a year.'

'You must consult your own wishes, Miss Malcolm. I cannot presume to interfere with your views, anxious as I am for your welfare.'

This was about as much as he would venture to say at this early stage of affairs. He felt his position indescribably awkward, and he wondered at Laura Malcolm's composure. What ought he to say or do? What could he say that would not seem

dictated by the most sordid motive? What disinterested feeling could there ever arise between those two, who were bound together by their common interest in a great estate, who met as strangers to find themselves suddenly dependent upon each other's caprice?

'I may call upon you before I leave Hazlehurst, may I not, Miss Malcolm?' he asked presently, with a kind of desperation.

'I shall be happy to see you whenever you call.'

'You are very kind. I'll not intrude on you any longer this evening, for I am sure you must want quiet and perfect rest. I must go down to dinner with Mr. Sampson and the vicar—rather a dreary kind of entertainment I fear it will be. Good-bye.'

He offered her his hand for the first time since they had met. Hers was very cold, and trembled a little as she gave it to him. He detained it rather longer than he was justified in doing, and looked at her for the first time with something like tender pity in his eyes. Yes, she was very pretty. He would have liked her face better without that expression of coldness and pride, but

he could not deny that she was beautiful, and he felt that any young man might be proud to win such a woman for his wife. He did not see his own way to winning her, however; and it seemed to him as if the fortune he had so built upon during all his reveries lately, was now removed very far out of his reach.

The dinner was not such a dismal feast as he had imagined it would be. People are apt to accustom themselves very easily to an old friend's removal, and the vicar and the lawyer seemed tolerably cheerful about their departed neighbour. They discussed his little eccentricities, his virtues, and his foibles, in an agreeable spirit, and did ample justice to his claret, of which, however, Mr. Clare said he had never been quite so good a judge as he had believed himself to be. They sat for a couple of hours over their dessert, sipping some Burgundy, of which Jasper Treverton had been especially proud, and John Treverton was the only one of the three who seemed troubled by gloomy thoughts.

It was ten o'clock when Mr. Sampson proposed

an adjournment to his own abode. He had sent a little note home to his sister before dinner, telling her of Mr. Treverton's intended visit, and had ordered a fly from the inn, in which vehicle he and his guest drove to 'The Laurels,' a trim, bright-looking, modern house, with small rooms which were the very pink of neatness, so neat and new-looking indeed, that John Treverton fancied they could never have been lived in, and that the furniture must have been sent home from the upholsterer that very day.

Thomas Sampson was a young man, and a bachelor. He had inherited an excellent business from his father, and had done a good deal to improve it himself, having a considerable capacity for getting on in life, and an ardent love of money-making. He had one sister, who lived with him. She was tolerably good-looking, in a pale, insipid way, with eyes of a cold light blue, and straight, silky hair of a nondescript brown.

This young lady, whose name was Eliza, welcomed John Treverton with much politeness. There were not many men in the neighbourhood of Hazle-

hurst who could have borne comparison with that splendid military looking stranger, and Miss Sampson, who did not yet know the terms of Jasper Treverton's will, supposed that this handsome young man was now master of the manor and all its dependencies. For his sake she had bestowed considerable pains on the adornment of the spare bed-room, which she had embellished with more fanciful pincushions, and ring stands and Bohemian glass scent-bottles, than are consistent with the masculine idea of comfort. For his gratification also she had ordered a reckless expenditure of coals in the keeping up of a blazing fire in the same smartly furnished chamber, which looked unspeakably small and mean to the eyes of John Treverton after the spacious rooms at the Manor-house.

'I know of a room that will look meaner still,' he said to himself, 'for this at least is clean and neat.'

He went to bed, and slept better than he had done for many nights, but his dreams were full of Laura Malcolm. He dreamt that they were being married, and that as she stood beside him at the altar her face changed in some strange ghastly way into another face, a face he knew only too well.

CHAPTER III.

A MYSTERIOUS VISITOR.

THE next day was fine, and Mr. Sampson and his visitor set out in a dogcart directly after breakfast on a tour of inspection. They got over a good deal of ground between an eight o'clock breakfast and a six o'clock dinner, and John Treverton had the pleasure of surveying many of the broad acres that were in all probability to be his own; but the farms which lay within a drive of Hazlehurst did not constitute a third of Jasper Treverton's possessions. Mr. Sampson told his companion that the estates were worth about eleven thousand a year altogether, besides which there was an income of about three thousand more accruing from money in the funds. The old man had begun life with only six thousand a year, but some of his land bordered closely on the town of Beechampton, and had developed from agricultural land

into building land in a manner that had increased its value seven-fold. He had lived quietly, and had added to his estate year after year by fresh purchases and investments, until it reached its present amount. To hear of such wealth was like some dream of fairy land to John Treverton. Mr. Sampson spoke of it as if to all intents and purposes it were already in the other's possession. His sound legal mind could not conceive the possibility of any sentimental objection on the part of either the gentleman or the lady to the carrying out of a condition which was to secure the possession of that noble estate to both. Of course, in due time Mr. Treverton would make Miss Malcolm a formal offer, and she would accept him. Idiocy so abject on the part of either the gentleman or the lady as a refusal to comply with so easy a condition was scarcely within the limits of human folly.

Looking at the matter from this point of view, Mr. Sampson was surprised to perceive a certain air of gloom and despondency about his companion which seemed quite unnatural to a man

in his position. John Treverton's eye kindled with a gleam of triumph as he gazed across the broad bare fields which the lawyer showed him; but in the next minute his face grew sombre again, and he listened to the description of the property with an absent air that was inexplicable to Thomas Sampson. The solicitor ventured to say as much by-and-bye, when they were driving homeward through the winter dusk.

'Well you see, my dear Sampson, there's many a slip between the cup and the lip,' John Treverton answered, with that light airy tone which most people found particularly agreeable. 'I must confess that the manner in which this estate has been left is rather a disappointment to me. My cousin Jasper told me that his death would make me a rich man. Instead of this I find myself with a blank year of waiting before me, and with my chances of coming into possession of this fortune entirely dependent upon the whims and caprices of a young lady.'

'You don't suppose for a moment that Miss Malcolm will refuse you?'

John Treverton was so long before he answered this question, that the lawyer presently repeated it in a louder tone, fancying that it had not been heard upon the first occasion.

'Do I think she'll refuse me?' repeated Mr. Treverton, in rather an absent tone. 'Well, I don't know about that. Women are apt to have romantic notions on the money question. She has enough to live upon, you see. She told me as much last night, and she may prefer to marry some one else. The very terms of this will are calculated to set a high-spirited girl against me.'

'But she would know that in refusing you she would deprive you of the estate, and frustrate the wishes of her friend and benefactor. She'd scarcely be so ungrateful as to do that. Depend upon it, she'll consider it her duty to accept you —not a very unpleasant duty either, to marry a man with fourteen thousand a year. Upon my word, Mr. Treverton, you seem to have a very poor opinion of yourself, when you imagine the possibility of Laura Malcolm refusing you.'

John Treverton made no reply to this remark, and was silent during the rest of the drive. His spirits improved, or seemed to improve a little at dinner, however, and he did his best to make himself agreeable to his host and hostess. Miss Sampson thought him the most agreeable man she had ever met, especially when he consented to sit down to chess with her after dinner, and from utter listlessness and absence of mind allowed her to win three games running.

'What do you think of Miss Malcolm, Mr. Treverton?' she asked, by-and-bye, as she was pouring out the tea.

'You musn't ask Mr. Treverton any questions on that subject, Eliza,' said her brother, with a laugh.

'Why not?'

'For a reason which I am not at liberty to discuss.'

'Oh, indeed!' said Miss Sampson, with a sudden tightening of her thin lips. 'I had no idea—at least I thought—that Laura Malcolm was almost a stranger to Mr. Treverton.'

'And you're quite right in your supposition, Miss Sampson,' answered John Treverton, 'nor is there any reason why the subject should be tabooed. I think Miss Malcolm very handsome, and that her manner is remarkable for grace and dignity—and that is all I am able to think about her at present, for we are, as you say, almost strangers to each other. As far as I could judge she seemed to me to be warmly attached to my cousin Jasper.'

Eliza Sampson shook her head rather contemptuously.

'She had reason to be fond of him,' she said. 'Of course you are aware that she was completely destitute when he brought her home, and her family were, I believe, a very disreputable set.'

'I fancy you must be mistaken, Miss Sampson,' John Treverton answered, with some warmth, 'my cousin Jasper told me that Stephen Malcolm had been his friend and fellow-student at the University. He may have died poor, but I heard nothing which implied that he had fallen into disreputable courses.'

'Oh, really,' said Miss Sampson, 'of course you know best, and, no doubt, whatever your cousin told you was correct. But to tell the truth Miss Malcolm has never been a favourite of mine. There's a reserve about her that I've never been able to get over. I know the gentlemen admire her very much, but I don't think she'll ever have many female friends. And what is of so much consequence to a young woman as a female friend?' concluded the lady sententiously.

'Oh, the gentlemen admire her very much, do they?' repeated John Treverton. 'I suppose, then she has had several opportunities of marrying already?'

'I don't know about that, but I know of one man who is over head and ears in love with her.'

'Would it be any breach of confidence on your part to say who the gentleman is?'

'Oh, dear no. I found out the secret for myself, I assure you. Miss Malcolm has never condescended to tell me anything about her affairs. It is Edward Clare, the vicar's son, I have seen them a good deal together. He used to be always

making some excuse for dropping in at the Manor-house to talk to Mr. Treverton about old books, and papers for the Archæological Society, and so on, and anybody could see that it was for Miss Malcolm's sake he spent so much of his time there.'

'Do you think she cared about him?'

'Goodness knows. There's no getting at what she thinks about any one. I did once ask her the question, but she turned it off in her cold, haughty way, saying that she liked Mr. Clare as a friend, and all that kind of thing.'

Thomas Sampson had looked rather uneasy during this conversation.

'You mustn't listen to my sister's foolish gossip, Treverton,' he said; 'it's hard enough to keep women from talking scandal anywhere, but in such a place as this they seem to have nothing else to do.'

John Treverton had taken his part in this conversation with a keener interest than he was prepared to acknowledge himself capable of feeling upon the subject of Laura Malcolm. What was

she to him, that he should feel such a jealous anger against this unknown Edward Clare? Were not all his most deeply-rooted feelings in her disfavour? Was she not rendered unspeakably obnoxious to him by the terms of his kinsman's will?

'There's something upon that man's mind, Eliza,' said Mr. Sampson, as he stood upon the hearthrug, warming himself in a thoughtful manner before the fire for a few minutes, after his guest had gone to bed. 'Mark my words, Eliza, there's something on John Treverton's mind.'

'What makes you think so, Tom?'

'Because he's not a bit elated about the property that he has come into, or will come into in a year's time. And it isn't in human nature for a man to come into fourteen thousand a year which he never expected to inherit, and take it as coolly as this man takes it.'

'What do you mean by a year's time, Tom? Hasn't he got the estate now?'

'No, Eliza; that's the rub.' And Mr. Sampson went on to explain to his sister the terms of Jasper

Treverton's will, duly warning her that she was not to communicate her knowledge of the subject to any one, on pain of his lasting displeasure.

Thomas Sampson was too busy next day to devote himself to his guest; so John Treverton went for a long ramble, with a map of the Treverton Manor estate in his pocket. He skirted many a broad field of arable and pasture land, and stood at the gates of farmhouse gardens, looking at the snug homesteads, the great barns and haystacks, the lazy cattle standing knee-deep in the litter of a straw yard, and wondering whether he should ever be master of these things. He walked a long way, and came home with a slow step and a thoughtful air in the twilight. About a mile from Hazlehurst he emerged from a narrow lane on to a common, across which there was a path leading to the village. As he came out of this lane he saw the figure of a lady in mourning a little way before him. Something in the carriage of the head struck him as familiar: he hurried after the lady, and found himself walking beside Laura Malcolm.

'You are out rather late, Miss Malcolm,' he said, not knowing very well what to say.

'It gets dark so quickly at this time of year. I have been to see some people at Thorley, about a mile and a half from here.'

'You do a good deal of visiting among the poor, I suppose?'

'Yes, I have been always accustomed to spend two or three days a week amongst them. They have come to know me very well, and to understand me, and, much as people are apt to complain of the poor, I have found them both grateful and affectionate.'

John Treverton looked at her thoughtfully. She had a bright colour in her cheeks this evening, a rosy tint which lighted up her dark eyes with a brilliancy he had never seen in them before. He walked by her side all the way back to Hazlehurst, talking first about the villagers she had been visiting, and afterwards about her adopted father, whose loss she seemed to feel deeply. Her manner this evening appeared perfectly frank and natural, and when John Treverton parted from her at the gates of the Manor-house, it was with

the conviction that she was no less charming than she was beautiful.

And yet he gave a short, impatient sigh as he turned away from the great iron gates to walk to The Laurels, and it was only by an effort that he kept up an appearance of cheerfulness through the long evening, in the society of the two Sampsons and a bluff red-cheeked gentleman-farmer, who had been invited to dinner, and to take a hand in a friendly rubber afterwards.

John Treverton spent the following day in the dogcart with Mr. Sampson, inspecting more farms, and getting a clearer idea of the extent and nature of the Treverton property that lay within a drive of Hazlehurst. He told his host that he would be compelled to go back to town by an early train on the next morning. After dinner that evening Mr. Sampson had occasion to retire to his office for an hour's work upon some important piece of business, so John Treverton, not very highly appreciating the privilege of a prolonged *tête-à-tête* with the fair Eliza, put on his hat and went out of doors to smoke a cigar in the village street.

Some fancy, he scarcely knew what, led him towards the Manor-house; perhaps because the lane outside the high garden wall at the side of the house was a quiet place for the smoking of a meditative cigar. In this solitary lane he paced for some time, coming round to the iron gates two or three times to look across the park-like grounds at the front of the house, whose closely-shuttered windows showed no ray of light.

'I wonder if I could be a happy man,' he asked himself, 'as the master of that house, with a beautiful wife and an ample fortune? There was a time when I fancied I could only exist in the stir and bustle of a London life, but perhaps, after all, I should not make a bad country gentleman, if I were happy.'

On going back to the lane after one of these meditative pauses before the iron gates, John Treverton was surprised to find that he was no longer alone there. A tall man, wrapped in a loose great-coat, and with the lower part of his face hidden in the folds of a woollen scarf, was walking slowly to and fro before a narrow little wooden

door in the garden wall. In that uncertain light, and with so much of his face hidden by the brim of his hat and the folds of his scarf, it was impossible to tell what this man was like, but John Treverton looked at him with a very suspicious feeling as he passed him near the garden door, and walked on to the end of the lane. When he turned back he was surprised to see that the door was open, and that the man was standing on the threshold, talking to some one within. He went quickly back in order to see, if possible, who this some one was, and as he came close to the garden door he heard a voice that he knew very well indeed, the voice of Laura Malcolm.

'There is no fear of our being interrupted,' she said, 'I would rather talk to you in the garden.'

The man seemed to hesitate a little, muttered something about 'the servants,' and then went into the garden, the door of which was immediately shut.

John Treverton was almost petrified by this circumstance. Who could this man be whom

Miss Malcolm admitted to her presence in this stealthy manner? Who could he be except some secret lover, some suitor she knew to be unworthy of her, and whose visits she was fain to receive in this ignoble fashion. The revelation was unspeakably shocking to John Treverton; but he could in no other manner account for the incident which he had just witnessed. He lit another cigar, determined to wait in the lane till the man came out again. He walked up and down for about twenty minutes, at the end of which time the garden door was re-opened, and the stranger emerged, and walked hastily away, John following him at a respectable distance. He went to an inn not far from the Manor-house, where there was a gig waiting for him, with a man nodding sleepily over the reins. He jumped lightly into the vehicle, took the reins from the man's hands and drove away at a smart pace, very much to the discomfiture of Mr. Treverton, who had not been able to see his face, and who had no means of tracing him any further. He did, indeed, go into the little inn and call for soda-water and

brandy, in order to have an excuse for asking who the gentleman was who had just driven away; but the innkeeper knew nothing more than that the gig had stopped before his door half an hour or so, and that the horse had had a mouthful of hay.

'The man as stopped with the horse and gig came in for a glass of brandy to take out to the gentleman,' he said, 'but I didn't see the gentleman's face.'

John Treverton went back to The Laurels after this, very ill at ease. He determined to see Miss Malcolm next morning before he left Hazlehurst, in order, if possible, to find out something about this mysterious reception of the unknown individual in the loose coat. He made his plans, therefore, for going to London by an afternoon train, and at one o'clock presented himself at the Manor-house.

Miss Malcolm was at home, and he was ushered once more into the study, where he had first seen her.

He told her of his intended departure, an

announcement which was not calculated to surprise her very much, as he had told her the same thing when they met on the common. They talked a little of indifferent subjects; she with perfect ease of manner; he with evident embarrassment; and then, after rather an awkward pause, he began—

'Oh, by the way, Miss Malcolm, there is a circumstance which I think it my duty to mention to you. It is perhaps of less importance than I am inclined to attach to it, but in a lonely country house like this one cannot be too careful. I was out walking rather late last night, smoking my solitary cigar, and I happened to pass through the lane at the side of these grounds.'

He paused a moment. Laura Malcolm gave a perceptible start, and he fancied that she was paler than she had been before he began to speak of this affair; but her eyes met his with a steady inquiring look, and never once faltered in their gaze as he went on—

'I saw a tall man—very much muffled up in an overcoat and neckerchief, with his face quite

hidden, in fact—walking up and down before the little door in the wall, and five minutes afterwards I was surprised by seeing the door opened, and the man admitted to the garden. The secret kind of way in which the thing was done was calculated to alarm any one interested in the inmates of this house. I concluded, of course, that it was one of the servants who admitted some follower of her own in this clandestine manner.'

He could not meet Laura Malcolm's eyes quite steadily as he said this, but the calm scrutiny of hers never changed. It was John Treverton who faltered and looked down.

'Some follower of her own,' Miss Malcolm repeated. 'You know, then, that the person who let this stranger into the garden was a woman?'

'Yes,' he answered, not a little startled by her self-possession. 'I heard a woman's voice. I took the trouble to follow the man when he came out again, and I discovered that he was a stranger to this place, a fact which, of course, makes the affair so much the more suspicious. I know that robberies are generally managed by collusion with some

servant, and I know that the property in this house is of a kind to attract the attention of professional burglars. I considered it, therefore, my duty to inform you of what I had seen.'

'You are very good, but I can fortunately set your mind quite at rest with regard to the plate and other valuables in this house. The man you saw last night is not a burglar, and it was I who admitted him to the garden.'

'Indeed?'

'Yes. He is a relation of mine, who wished to see me without making his appearance here the subject of gossip among the Hazlehurst people. He wrote to me, telling me that he was about to travel through this part of the country, and asking me to give him a private interview. It suited his humour best to come to this place after dark, and to leave it unobserved, as he thought.'

'I trust you will not think me intrusive for having spoken of this subject, Miss Malcolm?'

'Not at all. It was natural you should be interested in the welfare of the house.'

'And in yours. I hope that you will believe

that was nearer my thoughts than any sordid fears as to the safety of the old plate and pictures. And now that I am leaving Hazlehurst, Miss Malcolm, may I venture to ask your plans for the future?'

'They are scarcely worth the name of plans. I intend moving from this house to the lodgings I spoke of the other day, that is all.'

'Don't you think you will find living alone very dull? Would it not be better for you to go into a school, or some place where you could have society?'

'I have thought of that, but I don't fancy I should quite like the monotonous routine of a school. I am prepared to find my life a little dull, but I am very fond of this place, and I am not without friends here.'

'I can quite imagine that. You ought to have many friends in Hazlehurst.'

'But I have not many friends. I have not the knack of forming friendships. There are only two or three people in the world whose regard I feel sure of, or who seem to understand me.'

'I hope your heart is not quite inaccessible to new claims. There is a subject which I dare not speak of just yet, which it might be cruel to urge upon you at a time when I know your mind is full of grief for the dead; but when the fitting time does come I trust I may not find my case quite hopeless.'

He spoke with a hesitation which seemed strange in so experienced a man of the world. Laura Malcolm looked up at him with the same steady gaze with which her eyes had met his when he spoke of the incident of the previous night.

'When the fitting time comes you will find me ready to act in obedience to the wishes of my benefactor,' she answered, quietly. 'I do not consider that the terms of his will are calculated to secure happiness for either of us; but I loved him too dearly—I respect his memory too sincerely to place myself in opposition to his plans.'

'Why should not our happiness be secured by that will, Laura?' John Treverton asked, with sudden tenderness. 'Is there no hope that I may ever win your love?'

She shook her head sadly.

'Love very seldom grows out of a position such as ours, Mr. Treverton.'

'We may prove a happy exception to the general rule. But I said I would not talk of this subject to-day. I only wish you to believe that I am not altogether mercenary—that I would rather forego this fortune than force a hateful alliance upon you.'

Miss Malcolm made no reply to this speech, and after a few minutes' talk upon indifferent subjects, John Treverton wished her good-bye.

'She would accept me,' he said to himself as he left the house. 'Her words seemed to imply as much; the rest remains with me. The ice has been broken, at any rate. But who can that man be, and why did he visit her in such a secret, ignominious manner? If we were differently circumstanced, if I loved her, I should insist upon a fuller explanation.'

He went back to The Laurels, to bid his friends the Sampsons good-bye. The lawyer was ready to drive him over to the station, and made him

promise to run down to Hazlehurst again as soon as he was able, and to make The Laurels his head-quarters on that and all other occasions.

'You'll have plenty of love-making to do between this and the end of the year,' Mr. Sampson said, facetiously.

He was in very good spirits, having that morning made an advance of money to Mr. Treverton on extremely profitable terms, and he felt a personal interest in that gentleman's courtship and marriage.

John Treverton went back to town in almost as thoughtful a mood as that in which he had made the journey to Hazlehurst. Plan his course as he might, there was a dangerous coast ahead of him, which he doubted his ability to navigate. Very far away gleamed the lights of the harbour, but between that harbour and the frail bark that carried his fortunes how many shoals and rocks there were whose perils he must encounter before he could lie safe at anchor!

CHAPTER IV.

LA CHICOT.

About this time there appeared among the multifarious placards which adorned the dead walls and hoardings and railway arches and waste spaces of London one mystical dissyllable, which was to be seen everywhere.

Chicot. In gigantic yellow capitals on a black ground. The dullest eye must needs see it, the slowest mind must needs be stirred with vague wonder. Chicot! What did it mean? Was it a name or a thing? A common or a proper noun? Something to eat or something to wear? A quack medicine for humanity, or an ointment to cure the cracked heels of horses? Was it a new vehicle, a patent cab destined to supersede the world-renowned Hansom, or a new machine for cutting up turnips and mangold-wurzel? Was it the name of a new periodical? Chicot! There was something taking in the sound. Two short, crisp syllables, tripping

lightly off the tongue. Chicot! The street arabs shouted the word as a savage cry, neither knowing nor caring what it meant. But before those six-sheet posters had lost their pristine freshness most of the fast young men about London, the medical students and articled clerks, the dapper gentlemen at the War Office, the homelier youths from Somerset House, the shining-hatted city swells who came westward as the sun sloped to his rest, knew all about Chicot. Chicot was Mademoiselle Chicot, première danseuse at the Royal Prince Frederick Theatre and Music Hall, and she was, according to the highest authorities on the Stock Exchange and in the War Office, quite the handsomest woman in London. Her dancing was distinguished for its audacity rather than for high art. She was no follower of the Taglioni school of saltation. The grace, the refinement, the chaste beauties of that bygone age were unknown to her. She would have 'mocked herself of you' if you had talked to her about the poetry of motion. But for flying bounds across the stage—for wild pirouettings on tiptoe—for the free use of the loveliest

arms in creation—for a bold backward curve of a full white throat more perfect than ever sculptor gave his marble bacchanal, La Chicot was unrivalled.

She was thoroughly French. Of that there was no doubt. She was no scion of the English houses of Brown, Jones, or Robinson, born and bred in a London back-slum, and christened plain Sarah or Mary, to be sophisticated later into Celestine or Mariette. Zaïre Chicot was a weed grown on Gallic soil. All that there was of the most Parisian La Chicot called herself; but her accent and many of her turns of phrase belied her, and to the enlightened ear of her compatriots betrayed her provincial origin. The loyal and pious province of Brittany claimed the honour of La Chicot's birth. Her innocent childhood had been spent among the fig-trees and saintly shrines of Auray. Not till her nineteenth year had she seen the long, dazzling boulevards stretching into unfathomable distance before her eyes; the multitudinous lamps; the fairy-like kiosks—all infinitely grander and more beautiful than the square of Duguesclin at Dinan,

illuminated with ten thousand lampions on a festival night. Here in Paris life seemed an endless festival.

Paris is a mighty schoolmaster, a grand enlightener of the provincial intellect. Paris taught La Chicot that she was beautiful. Paris taught La Chicot that it was pleasanter to whirl and bound among serried ranks of other Chicots in the fairy spectacle of 'The Sleeping Beauty,' or the 'Hart with the Golden Collar,' clad in scantiest drapery, but sparkling with gold and spangles, with hair flowing wild as a Mænad's, and satin boots at two Napoleons the pair, than to toil among laundresses on the quay. La Chicot had come to Paris to get her living, and she got it very pleasantly for herself as a member of the *corps de ballet*, a cypher in the sum-total of those splendid fairy spectacles, but a cypher whose superb eyes and luxuriant hair, whose statuesque figure and youthful freshness did not fail to attract the notice of individuals.

She was soon known as the belle of the ballet, and speedily made herself obnoxious to the principal dancers, who resented her superior charms as an insolence, and took every occasion to snub her. But

while her own sex was unkind, the sterner sex showed itself gentle to la belle Chicot. The ballet-master taught her steps which he taught to none other of the sisterhood under his tuition; he made opportunities for giving her a solo dance now and then; he pushed her to the front; and at his advice she migrated from the large house where she was nobody, to a smaller house in the students' quarter, a popular little theatre on the left bank of the Seine, amidst a labyrinth of narrow streets and tall houses between the School of Medicine and the Sorbonne, where she soon became everybody. *C'était le plus gentil de mes rats*, cried the ballet-master, regretfully, when La Chicot had been tempted away. *Cette petite ira loin*, said the manager, vexed with himself for having let his handsomest coryphée slip through his fingers, *elle a du chien.*

At the Students' Theatre it was that La Chicot met with her fate, or, in other words, it was here that her husband first saw her. He was an Englishman, leading a rather wild life in this students' quarter of Paris, living from hand to mouth, very poor, very clever, very badly qualified to get his own living.

He was gifted with those versatile talents which rarely come to a focus or achieve any important result. He painted, he etched, he sang, he played on three or four instruments with taste and fancy, but little technical skill; he wrote for the comic papers, but the comic papers generally rejected or neglected his contributions. If he had invented a lucifer match, or originated an improvement in the sewing machine, he might have carved his way to fortune; but these drawing-room accomplishments of his hardly served to keep him from starving. Not a very eligible suitor, one would imagine, for a young lady from the provinces, who wished to make a great figure in life; but he was handsome, well-bred, with that unmistakable air of gentle birth which neither poverty nor Bohemianism can destroy, and in the opinion of La Chicot the most fascinating man she had ever seen. In a word, he admired the lovely ballet dancer, and the ballet dancer adored him. It was an infatuation on both sides—his first great passion and hers. Both were strong in their faith in their own talents, and the future; both believed that they had only to live in order to become rich and famous. La Chicot

was not of a calculating temper. She was fond of money, but only of money to spend in the immediate present; money for fine dresses, good dinners, wine that foamed and sparkled, and plenty of promenading in hired carriages in the Bois de Boulogne. Money for the future, for sickness, for old age, for the innumerable necessities of life, she never thought of. Without having ever read Horace, or perhaps ever having heard of his existence, she was profoundly Horatian in her philosophy. To snatch the pleasure of the day, and let to-morrow take care of itself, was the beginning and end of her wisdom. She loved the young Englishman, and she married him, knowing that he had not a Napoleon beyond the coin that was to pay for their wedding dinner, utterly reckless as to the consequences of their marriage, and as ignorant and unreasoning in her happiness as a child. To have a handsome man—a gentleman by birth and education—for her lover and slave,—to have the one man who had ensnared her fancy tied to her apron-string for ever,—this was La Chicot's notion of happiness. She was a strong-minded young woman, who to this point had made her way in life unaided

by relatives or friends, uncared for, uncounselled, untaught, a mere straw upon the tide of life, but not without a fixed idea of her own as to where she wanted to drift. She desired no guardianship from a husband. She did not expect him to work for her, or support her; she was quite resigned to the idea that she was to be the breadwinner. This child of the people set a curious value upon the name gentleman. The fact that her husband belonged to a superior race made up, in her mind, for a great many shortcomings. That he should be variable, reckless, a creature of fits and starts, beginning a picture with zeal in the morning, to throw it aside with disgust in the evening, seemed only natural. That was race. Could you put a hunter to the same kind of work which the patient packhorse performs without a symptom of revolt? La Chicot hugged the notion of her husband's superiority to that drudging herd from which she had sprung. His very vices were in her mind virtues.

They were married, and as La Chicot was a person of some importance in her own small world, while the young Englishman had done nothing to distinguish himself, the husband came

somehow to be known by the name of the wife, and was spoken of everywhere as Monsieur Chicot.

It was an odd kind of life which these two led in their meagrely furnished rooms on the third floor of a dingy house, in a dingy street of the students' quarter; an odd, improvident, dissipated life, in which night was turned into day, and money spent like water, and nothing desired or obtained out of existence except pleasure, the gross, sensual pleasures of dining and drinking; the wilder pleasure of play, and moonlight drives in the Bois; the Sabbath delights of free and easy rambles in rural neighbourhoods, beside the silvery Seine, on the long summer days, when a luxurious idler could rise at noon without feeling the effort too hard a trial; winding up always with a dinner at some rustic house of entertainment, where there was a vine-curtained arbour that one could dine in, and where one could see the dinner being cooked in a kitchen with a wide window opening on yard and garden, and hear the balls clicking in the low-ceiled billiard-room. There were winter Sundays, when it

seemed scarcely worth one's while to get up at all, till the scanty measure of daylight had run out, and the gas was aflame on the Boulevards, and it was time to think of where one should dine. So the Chicots spent the first two years of their married life, and it may be supposed that an existence of this kind quite absorbed Madame Chicot's salary, and that there was no surplus to be put by for a rainy day. Had La Chicot inhabited a world in which rain and foul weather were unknown, she could not have troubled herself less about the possibilities of the future. She earned her money gaily, and spent it royally; domineered over her husband on the strength of her superb beauty; basked in the sunshine of temporary prosperity; drank more champagne than was good for her constitution or her womanhood; grew a shade coarser every year; never opened a book or cultivated her mind in the smallest degree; scorned all the refinements of life; looked upon picturesque scenes and rustic landscapes as a fitting background for the riot and drunkenness of a Bohemian picnic, and as good for nothing

else; never crossed the threshold of a church, or held out her hand in an act of charity; lived for herself and her own pleasure; and had no more conscience than the butterflies, and less sense of duty than the birds.

If Jack Chicot had any compunction about the manner in which he and his wife were living, and the way they spent their money, he did not give any expression to his qualms of conscience. It may be that he was restrained by a false sense of delicacy, and that he considered his wife had a right to do what she liked with her own. His own earnings were small, and intermittent — a water-colour sketch sold to the dealers, a dramatic criticism accepted by the director of a popular journal. Money that came so irregularly went as it came.

'Jack comes to have sold a picture!' cried the wife; 'that great impostor of mine has taken it into his head to work. Let us go and dine at the "Red Mill." Jack shall make the cost.'

And then it was but to whistle for a couple of light open carriages, which, in this city of pleasure, stand in every street, tempting the idler

to excursionize; to call together the half-dozen chosen friends of the moment, and away to the favourite restaurant to order a private room and a little dinner, *bien soigné*, and one's particular brand of champagne, and then, hey for a drive in the merry greenwood, while the *marmitons* are perspiring over their *casseroles*, and anon back to a noisy feast, eaten in the open air, perhaps, under the afternoon sunshine, for La Chicot has to be at her theatre before seven, since at eight all Bohemian Paris will be waiting, eager and open-mouthed, to see the dancer with wild eyes and floating hair come bounding on to the stage. La Chicot was growing more and more like a Thracian Mænad as time went on. Her dancing was more audacious, her gestures more electrical. There was a kind of inspiration in those wild movements, but it was the inspiration of a Bacchante, not the calm grace of dryad or sea-nymph. You could fancy her whirling round Pentheus, mixed with the savage throng of her sister Mænads, thirsting for vengeance and murder; a creature to be beheld from afar with wondering

admiration, but a being to be shunned by all lovers of peaceful lives and tranquil paths. Those who knew her best used to speak pretty freely about her in the second year of her wedded life, and her third season at the Théâtre des Étudiants.

'La Chicot begins to drink like a fish,' said Antoine, of the orchestra, to Gilbert, who played the comic fathers; 'I wonder whether she beats her husband when she has had too much champagne?'

'They lead but a cat and dog sort of life, I believe,' answered the comedian; 'one day all sunshine, the next stormy weather. Renaud, the painter, who has a room on the same story, tells me that it sometimes hails cups and saucers and empty champagne bottles when the weather is stormy in the Chicot domicile. But those two are desperately fond of each other all the same.'

'I should not appreciate such fondness,' said the fiddler; 'when I marry it will not be for beauty. I would not have as handsome a wife as La Chicot if I could have her for the asking. A woman of that stamp is created to be the torment of her husband's life. I find that this Jack is not the

fellow he used to be before he married. C'est un garçon bémolisé par le mariage.'

When the Chicots had been man and wife for about three years—a long apprenticeship of bliss or woe—the lady's power of attracting an audience to the little theatre in the students' quarter began visibly to wane. The parterre grew thin, the students yawned or talked to each other in loud whispers while the dancer was executing her most brilliant steps. Even her beauty had ceased to charm. The habitués of the theatre knew that beauty by heart.

'C'est cliché comme une tartine de journal,' said one. 'C'est connu comme le dôme des Invalides,' said another. 'Cela fatigue; on commence à se désillusioner sur La Chicot.'

La Chicot saw the decline of her star, and that lively temper of hers, which had been growing more and more impulsive during the last three years, took reverse of fortune in no good spirit. She used to come home from the theatre in a diabolical humour, after having danced to empty benches and a languid audience, and Jack Chicot had to pay the cost. She would quarrel with him about a straw, a

nothing, on these occasions. She abused the students who stayed away from the theatre in roundest and strongest phraseology. She was still more angry with those who came and did not applaud. She upbraided Jack for his helplessness. Was there ever such a husband? He could not advance her interests in the smallest degree. Had she married any one else—one of those little gentlemen who wrote for the papers, for instance, she would have been engaged at one of the Boulevard theatres before now. She would be the rage among the best people in Paris. She would be earning thousands. But her husband had no influence with managers or newspapers, not enough to get a puff paragraph inserted in the lowest of the little journals. It was desolating.

This upbraiding was not without its effect upon Jack Chicot. He was a good-tempered fellow by nature, prone to take life easily. In all their quarrels it was his wife who took the leading part. When the cups and saucers and empty bottles went flying, she was the Jove who hurled those thunderbolts. Jack was too brave to strike a

woman, too proud to lower himself to the level of his wife's degradation. He suffered and was silent. He had found out his mistake long ago. The delusion had been brief, the repentance was long. He knew that he had bound himself to a low-born, low-bred fury. He knew that his only chance of escaping suicide was to shut his eyes to his surroundings, and to take what pleasure he could out of a disreputable existence. His wife's reproaches stung him into activity. He wrote half a dozen letters to old friends in London — men more or less connected with the press or the theatres—asking them to get La Chicot an engagement. In these letters he wrote of her only as a clever woman in whose career he was interested, he shrank curiously from acknowledging her as his wife. He took care to enclose cuttings from the Parisian journals in which the dancer's beauty and chic, talent and originality, were lauded. The result of this trouble on his part was a visit from Mr. Smolendo, the enterprising proprietor of the Prince Frederick Theatre, who had come to Paris in search of novelty, and the engagement of

Mademoiselle Chicot for that place of entertainment. Mr. Smolendo had been going in strongly for ballet of late. His scenery, his machinery, his lime-light and dresses were amongst the best to be seen in London. Everybody went to the Prince Frederick. It had begun its career as a music hall, and had only lately been licensed as a theatre. There was a flavour of Bohemianism about the house, but it only gave a zest to the entertainment. All the most notorious Parisian successes in the way of spectacular drama, all the fairy extravaganzas and demon ballets and comic operettas were reproduced by Mr. Smolendo at the Prince Frederick. He knew where to find the prettiest actresses, the best dancers, the freshest voices. His chorus and his ballet were the most perfect in London. In a word, Mr. Smolendo had discovered the secret of dramatic success. He had found out that perfection always pays.

La Chicot's beauty was startling and incontestable. There could not be two opinions about that. Her dancing was eccentric and clever. Mr. Smolendo had seen much better dancing from more

carefully trained dancers, but what La Chicot wanted in training she made up for with dash and audacity.

'She won't last many seasons. She's like one of those high-stepping horses that knock themselves to pieces in a year or two,' Mr. Smolendo said to himself, 'but she'll take the town by storm, and she'll draw better for her first three seasons than any star I've had since I began management.'

La Chicot was delighted at being engaged by a London manager, who offered her a better salary than she was getting at the students' theatre. She did not like the idea of London, which she imagined a city given over to fog and lung disease, but she was very glad to leave the scene where she felt that her laurels were fast withering. She gave her husband no thanks for his intervention, and went on railing at him for not having got her an engagement on the Boulevard.

'It is to bury myself to go to your dismal London,' she exclaimed, 'but anything is better than to dance to an assembly of idiots and cretins.'

'London is not half a bad place,' answered

Jack Chicot, with his listless air, as of a man long wearied of life, and needing a stimulant as strong as aquafortis to rouse him to animation. 'It is a big crowd in which one may lose one's identity. Nobody knows one, one knows nobody. A man's sense of shame gets comfortably deadened in London. He can walk the streets without feeling that fingers are being pointed at him. It is all the same to the herd whether he has just come out of a penitentiary or a palace. Nobody cares.'

The Chicots crossed the Channel, and took lodgings in a street in the neighbourhood of Leicester Square, near which, as every one knows, the Prince Frederick is situated. It was a dingy street, offering scanty attractions to the stranger, but it was a street which from the days of Garrick and Woffington had been favoured by actors and actresses, and Mr. Smolendo recommended the Chicots to seek a lodging there. He gave them the name of three or four householders who let lodgings to 'the profession,' and among these Madame Chicot made her choice.

The apartments which pleased her best were

two fair-sized rooms on a first floor, furnished with a tawdry pretentiousness which would have been odious to a refined eye, and which was particularly offensive to Jack's artistic taste. The cheap velvet on the chairs, the gaudy tapestry curtains, the tarnished ormolu clock and candelabra, delighted La Chicot. It was almost Parisian, she told her husband.

The drawing-room and bedroom communicated with folding-doors. There was a little third room —a mere hole—with a window looking northward, which would do for Jack to paint in. That convenience reconciled Jack to the shabby finery of the sitting-room, the doubtful purity of the bedroom, the woe-begone air of the street, with its half-dozen dingy shops sprinkled among the private houses, like an eruption.

'How it is ugly, your London!' exclaimed La Chicot. 'Is it that all the city resembles this, by example?'

'No,' answered Jack, with his cynical air. 'There are brighter looking streets where the respectable people live.'

'What do you call the respectable people?'

'The people who pay income tax on two or three thousand a year.'

Jack inquired as to the other lodgers. It was as well to find out what kind of neighbours they were to have.

'I am not particular,' said Jack, in French, to his wife, 'but I should not like to find myself living cheek by jowl with a burglar.'

'Or a spy,' suggested Zaïre.

'We have no spies in London. That is a profession which has never found a footing on this side of the Channel.'

The landlady was a lean-looking widow, with a false front of gingery curls, and a cap that quivered all over with artificial flowers on corkscrew wires. Her long nose was tinted at the extremity, and her eyes had a luminous yet glassy look, suggestive of ardent spirits.

'I have only one lady in the parlours,' she explained, 'and a very clever lady she is too, and quite the lady—Mrs. Rawber, who plays leading business at the Shakespeare. You must have heard of her. She's a great woman.'

Mr. Chicot apologized for his ignorance. He had been living so long in Paris that he knew nothing of Mrs. Rawber.

'Ah,' sighed the landlady, 'you don't know how much you've lost. Her Lady Macbeth is as fine as Mrs. Siddons's.'

'Did you ever see Mrs. Siddons?'

'No, but I've heard my mother talk about her. She couldn't have been greater in the part than Mrs. Rawber. You should go and see her some night. She'd make your flesh creep.'

'And a respectable old party, I suppose,' suggested Jack Chicot.

'As regular as clockwork. Church every Sunday morning and evening. No hot suppers. Crust of bread and cheese and glass of ale left ready on her table against she comes home—lets herself in with her key—no sitting up for her. Chop and imperial pint of Guinness at two o'clock, when there ain't no rehearsal, something plain and simple that can be kept hot on the oven top, when the rehearsal's late. She's a model lodger. No perquisites, but pay as regular

as the Saturday comes round, and always the lady.'

'Ah,' said Jack, 'that's satisfactory. How about upstairs? I suppose you've another pattern of commonplace respectability on your second floor?'

The landlady gave a faint cough, as if she were troubled with a sudden catching of the breath, and her eyes wandered absently to the window, where she seemed to ask counsel from the grey October sky.

'Who are your upstairs lodgers?' asked Jack Chicot, repeating his inquiry with a shade of impatience.

'Lodgers? No, sir. There's only one gentleman on my second floor. I have never laid myself out for families. Children are such mischievious young monkeys, and always tramping up and down stairs, or endangering their lives leaning out of winder, or leaving the street door open. And the damage they do the furniture! Well, nobody can understand that except them as have passed through the ordeal. No, sir, for the last

six years I haven't had a child across my threshold.'

'I wasn't inquiring about children,' said Mr. Chicot, 'I was asking about your upstairs lodger.'

'He's a single gentleman, sir.'

'Young?'

'No, sir; middle-aged.'

'An actor?'

'No, sir. He has nothing to do with the theatres.'

'What is he?'

'Well, sir, he is a gentleman—every one can see that — but a gentleman as has run through his property. I should gather from his ways that he must have had a great deal of property, and that he's run through most of it. He is not quite so regular in his payments as I could wish—but he does pay,—and he's very little trouble, for he's often away for a week at a time, the rent running on all the same of course.'

'That would hardly matter to him if he doesn't pay it,' said Chicot.

'Oh, but he does pay, sir. He's dilatory, but I

get my money. A poor widow like me couldn't afford to lose by the best of lodgers.'

'What is the gentleman's name?'

'Mr. Desrolles.'

'That sounds like a foreign name.'

'It may, sir, but the gentleman's English. I haven't in a general way laid myself out for foreigners,' said the landlady, with a glance at La Chicot, 'though this is rather a foreign neighbourhood.'

The lodgings were taken, and Jack Chicot and his wife began a new phase of existence in London. The life lacked much that had made their life in Paris tolerable—the careless gaiety, the brighter skies, the Bohemian pleasures of the French city—and Jack Chicot felt as if a dense black curtain had been drawn across his youth and all its delusions, leaving him outside in a cold, commonplace world, a worn-out, disappointed man, old before his time.

He missed the gay, happy-go-lucky comrades who had helped him to forget his troubles. He missed the drives in the leafy wood, the excursions

to suburban dining-houses, the riotous suppers after midnight, all the merry dissipations of his Parisian life. London pleasures were dull and heavy. London suppers meant no more than eating and drinking, too many oysters and too much wine.

Mr. Smolendo's expectations were fully realized. La Chicot made a hit at the Prince Frederick. Those flaming posters under every railway arch and on every hoarding in London were not in vain. The theatre was crowded nightly, and La Chicot was applauded to the echo. She breathed anew the intoxicating breath of success, and she grew daily more insolent and more reckless, spent more money, drank more champagne, and was more eager for pleasure, flattery, and fine dress. The husband looked on with a gloomy face. They were no longer the adoring young couple who had walked away arm in arm from the Mairie, smiling and happy, to share their wedding dinner with the chosen companions of the moment. The wife was now only affectionate by fits and starts, the husband had a settled air of despondency, which nothing but wine could banish, and which, like the seven

other spirits, returned with greater power after a temporary banishment. The wife loved the husband just well enough to be desperately jealous of his least civility to another woman. The husband had long ceased to be jealous, except of his own honour.

Among the frequenters of the Prince Frederick there was one who at this time was to be seen there almost nightly. He was a man of about five-and-twenty, tall, broad-shouldered, with strongly marked features, and the eye of a hawk, a man whose clothes were well worn, and whose whole appearance was slovenly, yet who looked like a gentleman; evidently uncared for, possibly destitute, but however low he might have sunk, a gentleman still.

He was a medical student, and one of the hardest workers at St. Thomas's—a man who had chosen his profession because he loved it, and whose love increased with his labour. Those who knew most about him said that he was a man destined to make his mark upon the age in which he lived. But he was not a man to achieve rapid success,

to distinguish himself by a happy accident. He went slowly to work, sounded the bottom of every well, took up every subject as resolutely as if it were the one subject he had chosen for his especial study, flung himself into every scientific question with the feverish ardour of a lover, yet worked with the steadiness and self-denial of a Greek athlete. For all the vulgar pleasures of life, for wine or play, for horse-racing, or riot of any kind, this young surgeon cared not a jot. He was so little a haunter of theatres, that those of his fellow-students who recognised him night after night at the Prince Frederick were surprised at his frequent presence in such a place.

'What has come to Gerard?' cried Joe Latimer, of Guy's, to Harry Brown, of St. Thomas's. 'I thought he despised ballet dancing. Yet this is the third time I have seen him looking on at this rot, with his attention as fixed as if he were watching Paget using the knife!'

'Can't you guess what it all means?' exclaime Brown. 'Gerard is in love.'

'In love!'

'Yes, over head and ears in love with La Chicot — never saw such a well-marked case — all the symptoms beautifully developed—sits in the front row of the pit and gazes the whole time she is on the stage—never takes his eyes off her—raves about her to our fellows—the loveliest woman that ever lived since the unknown young person who served as a model for the Venus that was dug up in a cave in the island of Milo. Fancy having known that young woman, and put your arm round her waist! Somebody did, I dare say. Yes, George Gerard is gone—annihilated. It's too pathetic.'

'And Mademoiselle Chicot is a married woman, I hear?' said Latimer.

'Very much married. The husband is always in attendance upon her. Waits for her at the stage door every night, or stands at the wing while she dances. La Chicot is a most correct person, though she hardly looks it. Ah! here comes Gerard. Well, old fellow, has the disease reached its crisis?'

'What disease?' asked Gerard, curtly.

'The fever called love.'

'Do you suppose I'm in love with the new dancer, because I drop in here pretty often to look at her?'

'I don't see any other motive for your presence here. You're not a playgoing man.'

'I come to see La Chicot simply because she is quite the most beautiful woman in face and form that I ever remember seeing. I come as a painter might to look at the perfection of human loveliness, or as an anatomist to contemplate the completeness of God's work, a creature turned out of the divine workshop without a flaw.'

'Did you ever hear such a fellow?' cried Latimer. 'He comes to look at a ballet dancer, and talks about it as if it were a kind of religion.'

'The worship of the beautiful is the religion of art,' answered Gerard, gravely. 'I respect La Chicot as much as I admire her. I have not an unworthy thought about her.'

Latimer touched his forehead lightly with two fingers, and looked at his friend Brown.

'Gone!' said Latimer.

'Very far gone,' replied Brown.

'Come and try the Dutch oysters, Gerard, and let us make a night of it,' said Latimer, persuasively.

'Thanks, no. I must go home to my den and read.'

And so they parted, the idlers to their pleasure, the plodding student—the man who loved work for its own sake—to his books.

CHAPTER V.

A DISAPPOINTED LOVER.

Laura Malcolm remained at the Manor House. Mr. Clare, the vicar, had persuaded her to relinquish her idea of going into lodgings in the village. It would be a pity to abandon the good old house, he argued. A house left to the care of servants must always suffer some decay; and this house was full of art treasures, objects of interest and of price which hitherto had been in Laura's charge. Why should she not stay in the home of her girlhood till it was decided whether she was to rule there as mistress, or to abandon it for ever?

'Your remaining here will not compromise your freedom of choice,' said Mr. Clare, kindly, 'if you find before the end of the year that you cannot make up your mind to accept John Treverton as a husband.'

'He may not ask me,' interjected Laura, with a curious smile.

'Oh yes, he will. He will come to you in good time to offer you his heart and hand, you may be sure, my dear. It cannot be a difficult thing for any young man to fall in love with such a girl as you, and it seems to me that this John Treverton is very worthy of any woman's regard. I see no reason why your marriage should not be a love match on both sides, in spite of my old friend's eccentric will.'

'I'm afraid that can never be,' answered Laura, with a sigh; 'Mr. Treverton will never be able to think of me as he might of any other woman. I must always seem to him an obstacle to his freedom and his happiness. He is constrained to assume an affection for me, or to surrender a splendid fortune. If he is mercenary he will not hesitate. He will take the fortune and me, and I shall despise him for his readiness to accept a wife chosen for him by another. No, dear Mr. Clare, there is no possibility of happiness for John Treverton and me.'

'My dear child, if you are convinced that you cannot be happy in this marriage, you are free on your part to refuse him,' said the vicar.

Laura's pale cheek crimsoned.

'That would be to doom him to poverty, and to frustrate his cousin's wish,' she answered, falteringly. 'I should hate myself if I could be so selfish as to do that.'

'Then, my dear girl, you must resign yourself to the alternative: and if John Treverton and you are not as passionately in love as the young people who defy their parents and run away to Gretna Green to be married—or did when I was a young man—you may at least enjoy a sober kind of happiness, and get on as well together as the princes and princesses whose marriages are arranged by cabinet councils and foreign powers.'

'Do you know anything about Mr. Treverton?' asked Laura, thoughtfully.

'Very little. He is an only son—an only child, I believe. His father and mother died while he was a boy, and he became a ward in Chancery. He had a nice little property when he came of age,

and ran through it nicely, after the manner of idle young men without friends to advise and guide them. He began his career in the army, but sold out after he had spent his money. I have no idea what he has been doing since—living by his wits, I'm afraid.'

So it was settled that Laura was to remain at the Manor House, with so many of the old servants as would suffice to keep things in good order—the servants to be paid and fed at the expense of the estate, Laura to maintain herself out of her own modest income. She was a young lady of particularly independent temper, and upon this point she was resolute.

'The money is nobody's money at present,' she said. 'I will not touch a penny of it.'

Sad as were the associations of the house, dreary as was the blank left in the familiar rooms by the absence of one revered figure, dismal as was the silence which that voice could never break again, Laura was better pleased to stay in her old home than she would have been to leave it. Even the mute, lifeless things among which she had lived so

long, had some part of her love, some hold upon her heart. She would have felt herself a waif and stray in a stranger's house. Here she felt always at home. If the rooms were haunted by the shadow of the dead, the ghost was a friendly one, and looked upon her with loving eyes. She had never thwarted, or neglected, or wronged her adopted father. There was no remorse mingled with her grief. She thought of him with deepest sadness, but without pain.

The vicar was anxious that Miss Malcolm should have a companion. There were plenty of homeless young women—women of spotless reputation and genteel connections — who would no doubt have been delighted to be her unsalaried companion, for the sake of a pleasant home. But Laura declared that she wanted no companion.

'You must think me very empty-minded if you suppose I cannot endure my life without a young woman of the same age to sit opposite me and answer to all my idle fancies like an echo, or to walk out with me and help me to admire the landscape, or to advise me what I should order

for dinner,' she said. 'No, dear Mr. Clare, I want no companion, except Celia now and then. You will let her come and see me very often, won't you?'

'As often as you like, or as often as she can be spared from her parish work,' answered the Vicar.

'Ah, you are all such hard workers at the Vicarage,' exclaimed Laura.

'Some of us work hard enough, I believe,' answered Mr. Clare, with a sigh. 'I wish my son could make up his mind to work a little harder.'

'That will come in good time.'

'I hope so, but I am almost tired of waiting for that good time.'

'He is clever and artistic,' said Laura.

'His cleverness allowed him to leave the University without a degree, and his artistic faculties will never help him to a living,' answered the Vicar, bitterly.

This only son of the Vicar's was a thorn in his side. Edward Clare was everybody's favourite, and nobody's enemy but his own. That was what

the village said of him. He was good-looking, clever, agreeable, but he had no ballast. He was a feather to be blown by every puff of wind. He had never been able to discover the work which he had been sent into the world to do, but he had speedily found out the work for which he was not adapted. At the University he discovered that the curriculum of an English classical education was not fitted to the peculiar cast of his mind. How much better he could have done at Heidelberg or Bonn! But when he made this discovery he had wasted three years at Oxford, and had cost his father something very close to a thousand pounds.

The Vicar wanted his only son to go into the Church, and Edward had been educated with that view, but after failing to get his degree, Edward found out that he had a conscientious repugnance to the Church. His opinions were too broad.

'A man who admires Ernest Renan as warmly as I do has no right to be a parson,' said Edward, with agreeable frankness; so poor Mr. Clare had

to submit to the disappointment of his most cherished hopes, because his son admired Renan.

After having made up his mind upon this point Edward stayed at home, read a good deal in a desultory way, wrote a little, sketched a little in fine weather, fished, shot, and dawdled away life in the pleasantest manner, finding his days never so sweet as when they were spent at the Manor House.

Jasper Treverton had warmly esteemed the Vicar, and he had liked the son for the father's sake. Edward had always been welcome at the Manor House while the old man lived, and as Edward's sister was Laura Malcolm's chosen friend, it was natural that the Oxonian should be very often in Laura's society.

But now his visits to the good old house where he had felt himself so completely at home, the library in which he had read, the garden in whose formal walks he had delighted to smoke, were suddenly restricted. Miss Malcolm had given him to understand, through his sister, that she considered herself no longer at liberty to receive him.

Her friendship for him was in no wise lessened, but it would not do for him to drop in at all hours, or to spend half his afternoons in the library, as in the days that were gone.

'I don't see why there should be such restrictions among old friends,' said Edward, with an injured air. 'Laura and I are like sister and brother.'

'Very likely, Ned, but then you see everybody knows you and Laura are not brother and sister, and I think there are a good many people in Hazlehurst who think that you feel something a good deal stronger than brotherly regard for her. If she and I were drowning, I know which of us you would try to save.'

'*You* can swim,' growled Edward, remembering Talleyrand's famous answer. 'Well, I suppose I must submit to fate. Miss Malcolm no doubt considers herself engaged to the mysterious heir, who does not seem in any hurry to begin his courtship. If old Treverton had bequeathed such a chance to me I should have seized upon my opportunity without an instant's hesitation.'

'I admire the delicacy which prompts Mr.

Treverton to keep in the background just at first,' said Celia.

'How do you know that it is delicacy which restrains him?' exclaimed Edward. 'How do you know that it is not some entanglement—some degrading connection, perhaps—or at any rate a previous engagement of some kind which ties his hands, and hinders his advancement with Laura? No man, unless so constrained, would be besotted enough to neglect such an opportunity, or to hazard his chances of success. If he offends Laura, she is just the kind of girl to refuse him, fortune and all.'

'I don't think she would do that, except upon very serious grounds,' said Celia. 'Laura has a strong sense of duty, and she believes it her duty to her adopted father to assist in carrying out his wishes. I believe she would sacrifice her own inclination to that duty.'

'That's going far,' said Edward, discontentedly, 'I begin to think that she has fallen in love with this fellow, meteoric as was his appearance here.'

'He stayed nearly a fortnight,' remarked Celia,

'and Laura saw him several times. I don't mean to say that she is in love with him. She has too much common sense to fall in love in that rapid way—but I am sure she does not dislike him.'

'Oh, when love begins common sense ends. I dare say she is in love with him. Hasn't she told you as much now, Celia? Girls like to talk about such things.'

'What do you know about girls?'

'Oh, nothing. I've got a sister who is one of the breed: a model always at hand to draw from. Come, now, Celia, be sisterly for once in your life. What has Laura told you about John Treverton?'

'Nothing. She is particularly reserved upon the subject. I know that it is a painful one for her, and I rarely approach it.'

'Well, he is a lucky dog. I never hated a fellow so much. I have an instinctive idea that he is a scoundrel.'

'Are not instinctive ideas convictions that jump with our own inclinations?' speculated

Celia, philosophically. 'I am heartily sorry for you, Ned dear, for I know you are fond of Laura, and it does seem hard to have her willed away from you like this. But seriously now, would you be pleased to marry her with no better portion than her own little income?'

'Six thousand in consols,' said Edward, meditatively. 'That would not go very far with a young man and woman of refined tastes. We might love each other ever so dearly, and be ever so happy together, but I'm afraid we should starve, Celia, and that our children's only inheritance would be their legal claim on their own parish. I thought that wicked old man would leave her handsomely provided for.'

'You had no right to think that, knowing that he had pledged himself to leave her nothing.'

'Oh, there would always have been a way of evading that. I call his will absolutely shameful—to force a high-spirited girl to take a husband of his choosing—a fellow whom he had never seen when he made the stipulation.'

'He took care to see young Mr. Treverton before he died. I dare say if he had not been favourably impressed he would have altered his will at the last moment.'

This conversation took place nearly four months after Jasper Treverton's death. The hedgerows were growing green; the birds had eaten the last of the crocuses; the violets were all in bloom in the shrubbery borders, the grass grew fast enough to require weekly shearing, and the Manor House garden was a pleasant place to walk in, full of budding trees and opening blossoms, and the songs of birds, telling each other rapturously that spring had come in earnest, and that winter days and a stony-hearted, frost-bound earth were things of the past.

Edward Clare believed himself the most ill-used of young men. He was good-looking—nay, according to the general judgment of his particular circle, remarkably handsome; he was cleverer and more accomplished than most young men of his age and standing. If he had done nothing as yet to distinguish himself it was not for lack

of talent, he told himself, complacently. It was only because he had never yet put his shoulder to the wheel. He did not consider that duty strongly called upon every man to do his uttermost part in the labour of moving that mighty wheel. A clever young man, like himself, might stand on one side and watch other fellows toiling at the job, knowing that he could do it ever so much better if he only cared to try.

Four years ago, when he first went to Oxford, he had made up his mind that he was to be Laura Malcolm's husband. Of course Jasper Treverton would leave her a handsome fortune, most likely his entire estate. There must be a dozen ways of evading that ridiculous oath. The old man might make over his property to Laura by deed of gift. He might leave it to trustees for her use and benefit. In some manner or other she would be his heiress. Edward felt very sure of that, seeing as he did Jasper's deep love of his adopted daughter. So when he found himself falling in love with Laura's sweet face and winning ways, the young Oxonian made no struggle against Cupid, the mighty conqueror.

To fall in love with Laura was the high road to fortune, infinitely better than Church or Bar. But he was in no hurry to declare himself—he was not an impulsive young man; slow and cautious rather. To make Laura an offer and be rejected would mean banishment from her society. He thought she liked him, but he wanted to be very sure as to the strength of her feelings before he declared himself her lover. His position as her friend was too advantageous to be lightly hazarded.

CHAPTER VI.

LA CHICOT HAS HER OWN WAY.

SLOWLY, reluctantly, Winter crawled away to his hidden lair, and made room for a chilly, uncomfortable spring. It had been the longest, dullest winter that Jack Chicot had ever lived through. He did not wonder that the Continental idea associated London fog and suicide in a natural sequence. Never had he felt himself so inclined to self-destruction as in the foggy December afternoons, the bleak January twilights, when he paced the dull grey streets under the dull grey sky, smoking his solitary cigar, and thinking what a dismal ruin he had made of himself and his life; he who had entered upon the bustling scene of manhood ten years ago, with such bright hopes, such an honourable ambition, such an arrogant confidence in the future as the bringer of all good things.

Now where was he? What was he? The

husband of La Chicot, a being in himself so worthless, so aimless and obscure that no one ever took the trouble to inquire his real name. His wife's name—the name made notorious by a ballet dancer, the goddess of medical students and lawyers' clerks, was good enough for him. In himself and by himself he was nothing. He was only the husband of La Chicot, a woman who drank like a fish and swore like a trooper.

It was a sorry pass for a man to have come to, in whom the sense of shame was not utterly dead. Perhaps it was something to be remembered in Jack Chicot's favour that at this time of his life, when despair had fastened its claw upon his aching heart, when love and liking had given place to a mute and secret abhorrence, he was not cruel or harsh to his wife. He never said hard or bitter things to her: so long as he had any lingering belief in her capability of amendment he remonstrated with her on the folly of her ways; always temperately, often with much kindness: and when he saw that reform was hopeless he held his peace and did not upbraid her.

She had never done him that kind of wrong which honour forbids a husband to forgive. So far she had been true to him, and loved him, in her maudlin way, flying at him like a fury when she was betwixt sobriety and intoxication, calling him her angel, or her cat, or her cabbage, with imbecile tenderness, when she was comfortably tipsy. He who had quarrelled with her a good deal before he began to hate her, could now endure her utmost violence and keep calm. He dared not give the reins to passion. It might carry him—he knew not whither. He felt like a man standing on the edge of a black gulf, blindfolded, yet knowing that the pit was there. One false step might be fatal. He had been luckier in this gloomy London than in his much-regretted Paris, so far as the exercise of his own small talents went. He had obtained a regular engagement as draughtsman on one of the comic journals, and his caricatures, pencilled on a wood block while his heart ached with misery and his head burned with fever, amused the idle youth of London with reminiscences of Cham and Gavarni. By the use of his pencil he

contrived to earn something like two pounds a week, more than enough for his own wants; so La Chicot could spend every sixpence of her salary on herself, an arrangement which suited her temper admirably. She had a bottle of champagne in her dressing-room every night, and finished it before she went on for her great pas. So long as she abstained from brandy this meant sobriety. She was a woman of limited ideas, and as in San Francisco champagne is 'wine' par excellence, no meaner liquor being deemed worthy of the noble name, so, with La Chicot, champagne was the only wine worth drinking. When she felt that its sustaining power was insufficient she fortified it with brandy, and then La Chicot was a creature to be shunned.

Winter lingered late that year. Though the green banks of every country lane and every hollow of the leafless woodland were starred with primroses and spangled with dog-violets, wintry winds were still wracking the forest trees, and whistling shrill among the London chimney-pots.

March had come in like a lion, and continued

to roar and bluster in leonine fashion to the very verge of April. A dry, dusty, bitter March, dealing largely in death and shipwreck. A villanous March, better calculated to inspire thoughts of suicide than even the fogs and creeping mists of November.

But even this miserable March came to an end at last. The London season had begun. La Chicot was attracting not only medical students and lawyers' clerks, the Stock Exchange, and the War Office, but the fine flower of the aristocracy—the topmost strawberries in the basket—the brobdignagian guardsmen, whose gloves were numbered nine and a half at the little hosier's in Piccadilly, the dainty foplings who wore a lady's six and three quarters, with four buttons, and who were beings of so frail and effeminate a type that a whisper through the telephone might blow them to the utmost ends of the earth. These opposite species, the athletics and the æsthetics, the hammer throwers, bicycle riders, boating men, hunting men, and pugilists, and the china collectors, art lunatics, and tame cat section

of society, met and mingled in the stalls at the Prince Frederick, and resembled each other in nothing except their appreciation of La Chicot.

Mr. Smolendo produced a new ballet early in April, a ballet which was as ridiculous and generally imbecile in plot and purpose as most of its kind, but which for scenery, dresses, and effects was supposed to surpass anything that had ever been accomplished at his theatre. Everything in this ballet tended to the glorification of La Chicot. She was the central figure, the cynosure: every crest was lowered to give prominence to hers, principal dancers were her handmaidens, a hundred ballet girls prostrated themselves before her throne, a hundred and fifty auxiliaries, specially engaged for this great spectacle, licked the dust beneath her feet. The final tableau, which was to cost Mr. Smolendo more money than he could calculate, was an apotheosis of La Chicot, a beautiful, bold, half-tipsy peasant, going to heaven on a telescopic arrangement of iron. It was a wonderful sight. The athletics

called it 'no end of jolly.' The æsthetics described it as 'unspeakably touching.'

This final tableau was supposed to represent the coral caves of the Indian Ocean. Chicot was a mermaid who lured mariners to their doom beneath the wave. She lived in a jewelled cavern, a hall sparkling and shining with sapphires and emeralds and lapis-lazuli, all flooded with rainbow light, where she and her sister mermaidens, golden, glittering, and scaly, danced perpetually. Then came the end, and she floated upward through an ocean of blue gauze, in a moving frame of rosiest coral.

The ironwork upon which she mounted was a somewhat complicated piece of machinery, a telescope in three parts, requiring nice adjustment on the part of the stage carpenter. It was perfectly safe if properly worked; but a hitch, the slightest carelessness in the working, would be perilous, and might be fatal.

'I don't like that business by any means,' said Jack Chicot, when he saw his wife ascending to the sky borders, in the dust and gloom of rehearsal, clad in her practising petticoats, and with a lace-

bordered handkerchief tied under her chin, like a coquettish nightcap. 'It looks dangerous. Can't you dispense with it, Smolendo?'

'Impossible; it's the great feature of the scene. Perfectly safe, I assure you. Roberts is the best carpenter in London.'

Mr. Smolendo's people were always the best. He had a knack of getting first-rate talent in every line, from his prima donna to his gasman.

'He seems clever, but rather a queer-tempered man, I hear.'

'Talent is always queer-tempered,' answered Smolendo, lightly. 'Amiability is the redeeming virtue of fools.'

Mr. Chicot was not convinced. He took his wife aside presently in a grove of dingy wings and side-pieces, and entreated her to refuse that ascent in the coral bower.

'*Pas si bête*,' she answered, curtly. 'I know what suits me. I shall look lovely in that coral frame with my hair down. You needn't be frightened, my friend. *Pas de danger.* Or, if I should be killed—come, I don't think that would

break your heart. It's a long time since you've left off caring for me as much as that.'

She snapped her fingers under his nose, with one of those little audacious movements of hers which were infinitely fascinating—to strangers. Jack Chicot shuddered visibly. Yes, it was horribly true. Her death would be his release from bondage. Her death? Would he know himself, believe in his own identity, if she were gone, and he was free to walk the world again, his own master, with hopes and ambitions of his own, bearing his own name, not ashamed to look mankind in the face, no longer known as the husband of La Chicot?

He persuaded her, earnestly, to have nothing to do with the ironwork that had been made to bear her to the theatrical skies. Why should she run such a risk? Any ballet girl would do as well, he argued.

'Yes, and the ballet girl would show off her good looks, and get all the applause. I am not such a fool as to give her the chance. Don't waste your breath in talking about it, Jack. I mean to do it.'

'Of course,' he said, bitterly, 'when did you ever renounce a caprice to please me?'

'Perhaps never. I am a creature of caprices. It was a caprice that made me marry you—a caprice that made you marry me, and now we are both honestly tired. That's a pity, isn't it?'

'I try to do my duty to you, my dear,' he answered gravely, with a sigh.

La Chicot had her own way, naturally, being one of those women who once having taken their bent are no more to be diverted than a mountain torrent which the rains have swollen. The new ballet was a success, the final tableau was a triumph for La Chicot. She looked lovely, in an attitude more perfect than anything that was ever done in marble—her round white arms lifted above her head, flinging back the loose branches of coral, her black hair covering her like a mantle. That long rich hair was one of her chief beauties—something to be remembered where all was beautiful.

The machinery worked splendidly. Jack was at the wings the first night, anxious and watchful. A fragment of conversation which he heard just

behind him while the coral bower was rising, did not tend to reassure him.

'It's all very well to-night,' said one of the scene shifters to his mate, 'they're both sober; but when she's drunk, and he's drunk, God help her.'

Jack went to Mr. Smolendo directly the curtain was down.

'Well,' cried the manager, radiant, 'a screaming success. There's money in it. I shall run this three hundred nights.'

'I don't like that ascent of my wife's. I hear that the man who works the machinery is a drunkard.'

'My dear fellow, these men all drink,' answered Smolendo, cheerfully. 'But Roberts is a treasure. He's always sober in business.'

Again Jack tried the effect of remonstrance with his wife, just as vainly as before.

'If you weren't a fool you would make Smolendo give me an extra five pounds a week on account of the danger, instead of worrying me about it,' she said.

'I am not going to make the safety of your life a question of money,' he answered; and after this there was no more said between them on the subject of the coral bower, but that speech of the scene shifter's haunted Jack Chicot.

'When she is drunk.' The memory of that speech was bitter. Though his wife's habits had long been patent to him, it was not the less galling to think that every one—the lowest servant in the theatre even—knew her vices.

Towards the end of April, Chicot and his wife had a serious quarrel. It arose out of a packet which had been left at the stage door for the dancer—a packet containing a gold bracelet, in a morocco case, bearing the name of one of the most fashionable and expensive jewellers at the West End. There was nothing to show whence the offering came; but on a narrow strip of paper, nestling under the massive gold band, there was scrawled in a mean little foreign-looking hand,—

'Homage to genius.'

La Chicot carried the gift home in triumph and exhibited it to her husband, clasped upon her round

white arm, a solid belt of gold, flat, wide, and thick, like a fetter, severely simple, an ornament for the arm of a Greek dancing girl.

'You will send it back, of course,' said Jack, frowning at the thing.

'But, my friend, where should I send it?'

'To the jeweller. He must know his customer.'

'I am not so stupid. There can be no harm in accepting an anonymous gift. I shall keep it, of course.'

'I did not think you had fallen so low.'

Upon this La Chicot retorted insolently, and there were very hard words spoken on both sides. The lady kept the bracelet, and the gentleman went next day to the jeweller who had supplied it, and tried to discover the name of the purchaser.

The jeweller was studiously polite, but he had no memory. Jack Chicot minutely described the bracelet, but the jeweller assured him that he sold a dozen such in a week.

'I think you must be mistaken,' said Chicot, 'this is a bracelet of very uncommon form. I

never saw one like it,' and then he repeated his description.

The jeweller shook his head with a gentle smile.

'The style is new,' he said, 'but I assure you we have sold several exactly corresponding to your description. It would be quite impossible to recall——'

'I see,' said Chicot, 'you would not like to disoblige a good customer. I dare say you know what the bracelet was meant for. Such shops as yours could hardly thrive unless they were indulgent to the vices of their patrons.'

And after launching that shaft Mr. Chicot left the shop.

He returned to his lodgings to pack a small portmanteau, and then went off to take his own pleasure. What need had such a wife as his of a husband's care? She would not accept his advice, or be ruled by him. She had chosen her road in life, and would follow it to the fatal end. Of what avail was his weak arm to bar the path? To this daughter of the people, with her deadened con-

science and indomitable will, that interposing arm was no more than a straw in her way.

'Henceforth I have done with her,' he said to himself. 'The law could desire no stronger divorce between us than this which she has made. And if she does me wrong the law shall part us. I will have no mercy.'

While he was packing his portmanteau an idea flashed into his mind. It was a horrible notion, and his cheek paled at the first aspect of it, but he took it to his heart nevertheless.

He was going away, for an indefinite time, perhaps. He would set a watch upon his wife. Her audacity, her insolence, had aroused the darkest suspicions. A woman who thus openly defied him must be capable of anything.

'Whom can I trust?' he asked himself, pausing in his preparations, on his knees before the open portmanteau. 'The landlady, Mrs. Evitt? No, she is sly enough, but she has too long a tongue. A glass of grog would loosen that tongue of hers at any time, and she would betray me to my wife. It must be a man. Desrolles. Yes, the very man. He has all the qualities of the trade.'

Chicot locked his portmanteau, strapped it, and carried it out on to the landing. Then he ran up to the second floor, and knocked at the door of the front room.

'Come in,' said a languid voice, and Jack Chicot went in.

The room smelt of brandy and stale cigars. It was shabbier and tawdrier than the sitting-room on the first floor—a sordid copy of that sordid original. There was the same attempt at finery, tarnished ormolu, gaudy chintz curtains and chair covers, where roses and lilies were almost effaced by dirt. The cheap tapestry carpet was threadbare, a desert of arid canvas, with here and there an oasis of faded colour, which hinted at the former richness of the soil. The windows were clouded with London grime and London smoke, and lent an additional gloom to the chilly sky and the dingy street upon which they looked. The cracked and bulging ceiling was brown with the smoke of ages. Dirt was the pervading impression which the room left upon the stranger's mind.

On a rickety old sofa lay the present proprietor

of the apartment, dozing gently at noontide, with the *Daily Telegraph* slipping from his loosened grasp. The remains of a bachelor breakfast, a half-empty egg-shell, a fragment of toast, and a cracked coffee-cup, indicated that he had but lately taken his morning meal.

He lifted himself lazily from the crumpled pillow, and confronted his visitor with a prolonged and audible yawn.

'Dear boy!' he exclaimed, 'what an untimely hour! What has happened that you are astir so early?'

He was not a common-looking man. He was tall, broad and deep of chest, with lean, muscular arms, an aquiline nose, large and somewhat prominent eyes, bloodshot and tarnished by long years of evil experience, thin iron-gray hair, worn unduly long, to conceal its scantiness, a complexion of a dull leaden hue, stained with patches of bistre, the complexion of a man to whom fresh air was an unusual luxury, thin lips, a high narrow forehead. He wore a threadbare frock coat, closely buttoned, a frayed black satin stock, gray trousers, tightly

strapped over well-worn boots, boots that had begun their career as dress boots.

Despite the shabbiness of his attire the man looked every inch a gentleman. That he was a gentleman who had fallen about as low as gentle breeding can fall, outside the Old Bailey, there was no doubt. Vice had set its mark upon him so deeply that the brand of crime itself could scarcely have done more to separate him from respectability. A man must have been very young indeed, and utterly unlearned in the experience of life, who would have trusted Mr. Desrolles in any virtuous enterprise. But Jack Chicot showed himself by no means wanting in penetration when he pitched upon Mr. Desrolles as a likely instrument for doing dirty work. He was the material of which the French *mouchard* is made.

'I've been worried, Desrolles,' answered Jack, dropping wearily into a chair.

'My dear fellow, the normal condition of life is worry,' replied Desrolles, languidly. 'The wisest of Jews knew all about it. Man was born to trouble as the sparks fly upward. The most that philo-

sophy can suggest is to take trouble easily, as I do. All the Juggernaut cars of life have gone over me, but I am not crushed.'

The tone was at once friendly and familiar. Jack Chicot and the second-floor lodger had become acquainted very soon after the Chicots' advent in Cibber Street. They met each other on the stairs, first smiled, then nodded, then loitered to discuss, and generally to anathematise the weather, then went a little further, and talked about the events of the day—the shocking murder recorded in the morning paper—the fire down Millwall way—the chances of war, or disturbances in the political atmosphere. By-and-bye Jack Chicot asked Desrolles into his room, and they played a hand or two at ecarté, first-rate players both, for threepenny points. Soon the ecarté became an institution, and they played two or three times a week, while La Chicot was standing on the tips of her satin-shod toes, and enchanting the gilded youth of the capital. Jack found his acquaintance a man of infinite resources and wide experience. He had begun life in a good social position, had—according to his own

account—distinguished himself as a soldier under such men as Gough and Hardinge; and had descended slowly, step by step, to be the thing he was. That gradual descent had carried him through scenes so strange and varied that his experiences of all that is oddest and worst in life would have made a book as big as 'Les Miserables.' And the creature knew how to talk. He never told the same story twice. Jack sometimes fancied this must be because he invented his stories upon the spot, and forgot them immediately afterwards. The man was no pretender to virtues which he did not possess, but rather advertised his vices. The only redeeming qualities he affected were a recklessness in money matters, which he appeared to consider generosity, and a rough and ready notion of honour, such as is supposed to obtain among thieves. Jack tolerated, despised, and allowed himself to be amused by the man. If he had been a king he would have liked such a fellow to lounge beside his throne, dressed in motley, flinging Rabelaisian witticisms in the smug faces of the courtiers.

'What's the particular trouble to-day, Jack?'

asked Desrolles, selecting a meerschaum from the litter on the mantelpiece, and lazily filling the blackened bowl. 'Financial, I conclude.'

'No. I am anxious about my wife.'

'The natural penalty for marrying the handsomest woman in Paris. What's the mischief you're afraid of?'

'She has received a present from an anonymous admirer; and because it is anonymous, she imagines she is justified in receiving it.'

'Where's the harm?'

'You ought to see it. The anonymous gift is the thin end of the wedge. The giver will see my wife dancing with his bracelet on her arm, and will believe her as venal as the girl who sold Rome for the same kind of gewgaw. He will follow up his first offering with a second, and then will come letters, anonymous at first, perhaps, like the bracelet, but when by insidious flattery he has smoothed the way to dishonour, he will declare himself—and then——'

'Unless your wife is a better woman than you believe her, there will be danger. Is that what you

mean?' asked Desrolles, calmly, slowly puffing at his meerschaum.

'No,' said Chicot, reddening indignantly. He had not fallen low enough to hear his wife maligned, though he hated her. 'No. If my wife were a woman to be led away by temptation of that kind, she and I would have parted long ago. But I don't want to leave her exposed to the pursuit of a scoundrel. She and I have quarrelled about his trumpery bracelet, and I am going to leave her for a few days, till we are both in a better temper. I don't want to leave her unprotected, with some silky rascal lying in wait for her between her lodgings and the theatre. I want some one, a man I can trust——'

'To keep an eye upon her while you're away,' said Desrolles. 'My dear fellow, consider it done. Madame Chicot and I are excellent friends. I admire her; and I think she likes me. I will be her slave and her guardian in your absence, a father, with more than a father's devotion.'

'She must not know,' exclaimed Jack.

'Of course not. Women are children of a larger growth, and must be treated as such. The

pills we give them must be coated with sugar, the powders concealed in raspberry jam. I will make myself so agreeable to Madame Chicot that she will be delighted to accept my escort to and from the theatre: but I will keep her anonymous admirer at a distance as thoroughly as the fiercest dragon that ever kept watch over beauty.'

'A thousand thanks, Desrolles. You won't find me ungrateful. Good-bye.'

'Are you going across the Channel?'

Mr. Chicot did not say where he was going, and Desrolles was too discreet to push the question. He was a man who boasted sometimes, when drink had made him maudlin, that, whatever had become of his morals, he had never lost his manners.

Jack Chicot left a brief pencilled note for his wife:—

'DEAR ZAIRE,—Since we get on so badly together, a few days' separation will be good for both of us. I am off to the country for a breath of fresh air. I sicken in the odour of gas and stale brandy. Take care of yourself for your own sake, if not for mine.—Yours. 'J. C.'

CHAPTER VII.

"A LITTLE WHILE SUCH LIPS AS THINE TO KISS."

It was midwinter when Jasper Treverton died. Spring had come in all her glory—her balmy airs and sultry noontides, stolen from summer; her variety and wealth of wood and meadow blossoms; her snowy orchard bloom, tinted with carnation; her sweetness and freshness of beauty,—a season to be welcomed and enjoyed like no other season in the changing year; a little glimpse of Paradise on earth between the destroying gales of March and the fatal thunderstorms of July. Spring had filled all the lanes and glades round Hazlehurst with perfume and colour when John Treverton reappeared in the village, as unexpectedly as if he had dropped from the skies.

Eliza Sampson was destroying the aphids on a favourite rose tree, handling them daintily with

the tips of her gloved fingers, as if she loved them, when Mr. Treverton appeared at the little iron gate, carrying his own portmanteau. He, the heir of all the ages, and of what signified much more in Miss Sampson's estimation, an estate worth fourteen thousand a year.

'Oh,' she cried, 'Mr. Treverton, how could you? We would have sent the boy to the station.'

'How could I do what?' he asked, laughing at her horrified look.

'Carry your own portmanteau. Tom will be so vexed.'

'Tom need know nothing about it, if it will vex him. The portmanteau is light enough, and I have only brought it from the 'George,' where the 'bus dropped me. You see I have taken your brother at his word, Miss Sampson, and have come to quarter myself upon you for a few days.'

'Tom will be delighted,' said Eliza.

She was meditating how the dinner she had arranged for Tom and herself could be made to do for the heir of Hazlehurst Manor. It was one of those dinners in which the economical

housekeeper delights, a dinner that clears up every scrap in the larder, and leaves not so much as a knuckle bone for the predatory 'follower,' male or female, the cook's hungry niece, or the housemaid's young man. A little soup, squeezed, as by hydraulic pressure, out of cleanly picked bones and odd remnants of gristle; a dish of hashed mutton, a very small hash, fenced round with a machicolated parapet of toasted bread; a beefsteak pudding with a kidney in it, boiled in a basin the size of a breakfast-cup. This latter savoury mess was intended to gratify Tom, who was prejudiced against hashed mutton, and always pretended that it disagreed with him. For *entremets sucrés* there were a dish of stewed rhubarb, and a mould of boiled rice, wholesome, simple, and inexpensive. It was a little dinner which did honour to Miss Sampson's head and heart; but she felt that it was not good enough for the future lord of Hazlehurst, a gentleman out of whom her brother hoped to make plenty of money by-and-bye.

'I'll go and see about your room while you

have a chat with Tom in the office,' she said, tripping lightly away, and leaving John Treverton on the lawn in front of the drawing-room windows, a closely shorn piece of grass, about fifty feet by twenty-five.

'Pray don't give yourself any trouble,' he called after her, 'I'm used to roughing it.'

Eliza was in the kitchen before he had finished his sentence. She was deep in consultation with the cook, who would have resented the unannounced arrival of any ordinary guest, but who felt that Mr. Treverton was a person for whom people must be expected to put themselves about. He had given liberal vails, too, after his last visit, and that was much in his favour.

'We must have some fish, Mary,' said Eliza, 'and poultry. It's dreadfully dear at this time of year, and Trimpson does impose so, but we must have it.'

Trimpson was the only fishmonger and poulterer of Hazlehurst, a trader whose stock sometimes consisted of a pound and a half of salmon, and a single fowl, long-necked and skinny,

hanging in solitary glory above the slate slab, where the salmon steak lay frizzling in the afternoon sun, which shone full upon Trimpson's shop.

'Well, miss, if I was you, I'd have a pair of soles and a duck to follow, with the beefsteak pudding for a bottom dish,' suggested cook, 'but, lawks, what's the good of talking? we must have what we can get. But I saw two ducks in Trimpson's window this morning when I went up street.'

'Put on your bonnet, Mary, and run and see what you can do,' said Eliza. And then, while Mary ran off, without stopping to put on her bonnet, Miss Sampson and the housemaid went upstairs together and took out lavender-scented linen, and decorated the spare room with all those pin-trays, china candlesticks, and pomatum pots, which went into retirement when there was no company.

'Of course he has come to make her an offer,' mused Eliza, as she lingered to give a finishing touch to the room, after the housemaid had gone downstairs.

'He has waited a proper time after the old gentleman's death, and now he has come down to ask her to marry him, and I dare say they will be married before the summer is over. It will be rather awkward for her to throw off such deep mourning all at once, but that's her own fault for going into crape, just as if Mr. Treverton had really been her father! I put it down to pride.'

Miss Sampson had a knack of finding motives for all the acts of her acquaintance, and those motives were rarely of the best.

John Treverton's chat with Mr. Sampson did not last more than ten minutes, friendly, and even affectionate, as was the lawyer's reception.

'I see you're busy,' said Treverton; 'I'll go and have a stroll in the village.'

'No, upon my honour, I was just going to strike work. I'll come with you if you like.'

'On no account; I know you haven't half finished. Dinner at six, as usual, I suppose. I'll be back in time for a talk before we sit down.'

And before Mr. Sampson could remonstrate, John Treverton was gone. He wanted to see what

Hazlehurst Manor was like in the clear spring light, framed in greenery, brightened with all the flowers that bloom in early May, musical with thrush and blackbird, noisy with the return of the swallows. Never had he so longed to look upon anything as he longed to-day to see the home of his ancestors, the home which might be his.

He walked quickly along the village street. Such a quaint little street, with never one house like another; here a building bulging forward, with bow-windows below and projecting dormers above; there a house retiring modestly behind a patch of garden; further on an inn set at right angles with the highway, its chief door approached by a flight of stone steps that time had worn crooked. Such a variety of chimneys, such complexities in the way of roofs and gables; but everywhere cleanliness and spring flowers, and a purer air than John Treverton had breathed for a long time. Even this queer little village street, with its dozen shops and its half-dozen public-houses, was very fair and pleasant in his town-weary eyes.

When he left the street he entered a noble high road, bordered on each side by a row of fine old elms, which made the turnpike road an avenue, worthy to be the approach to a king's palace. The Manor-house lay off this road, guarded by tall gates of florid iron tracery, manufactured in the low countries two hundred years ago. He stopped at the gates to contemplate the scene, looking at it dreamily, as at something unreal—a picture that was fair but evanescent, and might vanish as he gazed.

Between the gates and the house the ground undulated gently. It was all smooth sward, too small for a park, too irregular for a lawn. A winding carriage road, shadowed with fine old trees, skirted the green expanse, and groups of shrubs here and there adorned it, rhododendrons, laurels, bay, deodoras, cypresses, all the variety of ornamental conifers. Two great cedars made islets of shadow in the sunny grass, and a copper beech, a giant of his kind, was just showing its dark brown buds. Beyond stood the Manor-house, tall, and broad, and red, with white stone dressings to

door and windows, and a noble cornice, a house of Charles the Second's reign, a real Sir Christopher Wren house, massive and grand in its stern simplicity.

John Treverton roused himself from his waking dream and rang the bell. A woman came out of the lodge, looked at him, dropped a low curtsey, opened the gate, and admitted him without a word, as if he were master there. In her mind he was master, though the trustees paid her wages. It was an understood thing in the household that Mr. Treverton was going to marry Miss Malcolm and reign at Hazlehurst Manor.

He walked slowly across the smooth, well-kept grass. Everything was changed and improved by the altered season. House and grounds seemed new to him. He remembered the flower garden on the left of the house, the cheerless garden without a flower, where he had walked in the bleak winter mornings, smoking his solitary cigar; he remembered the walled fruit garden beyond, to which he had seen that strange guest admitted under cover of darkness.

The thought of that night scene in the winter disturbed him even to-day, despite the apparent frankness of Laura's explanation.

'I suppose there is a mystery in every life,' he said, with a sigh; 'and, after all, what can it matter to me?'

He had heard nothing of the change in Miss Malcolm's plans, and supposed the house abandoned to the care of servants. He was surprised to see the drawing-room windows open, flowers on the tables, and a look of domesticity everywhere. He went past the house and into the flower garden, a garden of the Dutch school, prim and formal, with long, straight walks, box borders, junipers clipped into obelisks, a dense yew hedge, eight feet high, with arches cut in it, to give admittance to the adjoining orchard. The beds and borders were a blaze of red and yellow tulips, which shone out against the verdure of the close-shorn bowling green and the tawny hue of the gravel, and made a feast of vivid colour, like the painted windows of a cathedral. John Treverton, who had not seen such a garden for years, was almost dazzled by its homely beauty.

He walked slowly to the end of the long path, looking about him in dreamy contentment. The sweet, soft air, the sunshine—just at that quiet hour of the afternoon when the light begins to be golden—the whistling of the blackbirds in the shrubbery, the freshness and beauty of all things, steeped his soul in a new delight. His life of late had been spent in cities, fenced from the beauty of earth by a wilderness of walls, the glory of heaven screened by smoke, the air thick and foul with the breath of men. This placid garden scene was as new to him as if he had come straight from the bottom of a mine.

Presently he stopped, as if struck with a new thought, looked straight before him, and muttered between clenched teeth,—

'I shall be a fool if I let it slip from my hand.'

'It' meant Hazlehurst Manor, and the lands and fortune thereto belonging.

He was standing within a few yards of the yew tree hedge, and just at this moment the green arch opposite him became the frame of a living picture, and that a lovely one.

Laura Malcolm stood there, bareheaded, dressed in black, with a basket of flowers upon her arm,—Laura, whom he had no idea of meeting in this place.

The western sky was behind her, and she stood, a tall, slim figure in straight, black drapery, against a golden background, like a saint in an early Italian picture, an edge of light upon her chestnut hair making almost an aureole, her face in shadow.

For a few moments she paused, evidently startled at the apparition of a stranger, then recognized the intruder, and came forward and offered him her hand frankly, as if he had been quite a commonplace acquaintance.

'Pray, forgive me for coming in unannounced,' he said, 'I had no idea I should find you here. Yet it is natural that you should come sometimes to look at the old gardens.'

'I am living here,' answered Laura, 'Didn't you know?'

'No, indeed. No one informed me of the change in your plans.'

'I am so fond of the dear old house and garden,

and the place is so full of associations for me that I was easily induced to stay, when Mr. Clare told me that it would be better for the house. I am a kind of housekeeper in charge of everything.'

'I hope you will stay here all your life,' said Treverton, quickly, and then he coloured crimson, as if he had said something awful.

The same crimson flush mounted almost as quickly to Laura's pale cheeks and brow. Both stood looking at the ground, embarrassed as a schoolboy and girl, while the blackbirds whistled triumphantly in the shrubbery, and a thrush in the orchard went into ecstacies of melody.

Laura was the first to recover.

'Have you been staying long at Hazlehurst?' she asked, quietly.

'I only came an hour ago. My first visit was to the Manor, though I expected to find it an empty house.'

Another picture now appeared in the green frame—a young lady with a neat little figure, a retroussé nose, and an agreeably vivacious countenance.

'Come here, Celia,' cried Laura, 'and let me introduce Mr. Treverton. You have heard your father talk about him. Mr. Treverton, Miss Clare.'

Miss Clare bowed and smiled, and murmured something indefinite. 'Poor Edward,' she was thinking all the while, 'this Mr. Treverton is awfully good-looking.'

Awfully was Miss Clare's chief laudatory adjective; her superlative form of praise was 'quite too awfully,' and when enthusiasm carried her beyond herself she called things 'nice.' 'Quite too awfully nice,' was her maximum of rapture.

As she rarely left Hazlehurst Vicarage, and knew in all about twenty people, it is something to her credit that she had made herself mistress of the current metropolitan slang.

'I suppose you are staying at the Sampsons?' she said; 'Mr. Sampson is always talking of you. "My friend Treverton," he calls you, but I suppose you won't mind that. It's rather trying.'

'I think I can survive even that,' answered John, who felt grateful to this young person for

having come to his rescue at a moment when he felt himself curiously embarrassed; 'Mr. Sampson has been very kind to me.'

'If you can only manage to endure him he is an awfully good-natured little fellow,' said Miss Clare with her undergraduate air. She modelled her manners and opinions upon those of her brother, and was in most things a feminine copy of the Oxonian. 'But how do you contrive to get on with his sister? She is quite too dreadful.'

'I confess that she is a lady whose society does not afford me unqualified delight,' said John, 'but I believe she means kindly.'

'Can a person with white eyelashes mean kindly?' enquired Celia, with a philosophical air. 'Has not Providence created them like that, as a warning; just as venemous snakes have flat heads.'

'That is treating the matter rather too seriously,' said John, 'I don't admire white eyelashes, but I am not so prejudiced as to consider them an indication of character.'

'Ah,' replied Celia, with a significant air, 'you will know better by-and-bye.'

She was only twenty, but she talked to John Treverton with as assured a tone as if she had been ages older than he in wisdom and experience of life.

'How pretty the gardens are at this season,' said Treverton, looking round admiringly, and addressing his remark to Laura.

'Ah, you have only seen them in winter,' she answered, 'perhaps you would like to walk round the orchard and shrubberies?'

'I should, very much.'

'And after that we will go indoors and have some tea,' said Celia. 'You are fond of tea, of course, Mr. Treverton?'

'I confess that weakness.'

'I am glad to hear it. I hate a man who is not fond of tea. There is that brother of mine appreciates nothing but strong coffee without milk. I'm afraid he'll come to a bad end.'

'I am glad you think tea-drinking a virtue,' said John, laughing.

And then they all three went under the yew-tree arch, into the loveliest of orchards—an orchard

of seven or eight acres—an orchard that had been growing a century and a half, — pears, plums, cherries, apples; here and there a walnut tree towering above the rest; here and there a grey old medlar; a pool in a corner overshadowed by two rugged old quinces; grass so soft, and deep, and mossy; primroses, daffodils; pale purple crocuses; the whole bounded by a sloping bank on which the ferns were just unfolding their snaky, grey coils, and revealing young leaves of tenderest green, under a straggling hedge of hawthorn, honeysuckle, and eglantine.

Here among the old gnarled trunks, and on the hillocky grass Mr Treverton and the two young ladies walked for about half an hour, enjoying the beauty and freshness of the place, in this sweetest period of the balmy spring day. Celia talked much, and John Treverton talked a little, but Miss Malcolm was for the most part silent. And yet John did not think her dull or stupid. It was enough for him to look at that delicate, yet firmly-modelled profile, the thoughtful brow, grave lips, and calm dark eyes, to know that neither intellect nor goodness was

wanting in her whom his kinsman had designed for his wife.

'Poor old man!' he thought, 'he meant to secure my happiness without jeopardising hers. If he could have known—if he could have known!'

They returned to the garden by a different arch; they visited the hot-houses, where the rose-hued azalias and camelias made pyramids of vivid colour; they glanced at the kitchen garden with its asparagus beds and narrow box-edged borders, its all-pervading odour of sweet herbs and wallflowers.

'I am positively expiring for want of a cup of tea,' cried Celia. 'Didn't you hear the church clock strike five, Laura?'

John remembered the six o'clock dinner at The Laurels.

'I really think I must deny myself that cup of tea,' he said. 'The Sampsons dine at six.'

'What of that?' exclaimed Celia, who never would let a man out of her clutches till stern necessity snatched him from her. 'It is not above ten minutes' walk from here to The Laurels.'

'What an excellent walker you must be, Miss

Clare. Well, I'll hazard everything for that cup of tea.'

They went into a pretty room, opening out of the garden, a room with two long windows wreathed round with passion-flower and starry white clematis —the clematis montana, which flowers in spring. It was not large enough for a library, so it was called the book-room, and was lined from floor to ceiling with books—a great many of which had been collected by Laura. It was quite a lady's collection. There were all the modern poets, from Scott and Byron downwards, a good many French and German books—Macaulay, De Quincey, Lamartine, Victor Hugo—a good deal of history and belles-lettres, but no politics, no science, no travels. The room was the essence of snugness—flowers on mantel-piece and tables, basket-work easy chairs, cushions adorned with crewel-work, delightful little tables (after Chippendale), and on one of the tables a scarlet Japanese tea-tray, with the quaintest of old silver teapots, and cups and saucers in willow pattern Nankin ware. Laura poured out the tea, while Celia began to devour hot buttered cake, the very

look of which suggested dyspepsia; but to some weak minds earth has no more overpowering temptation on a warm spring afternoon than hot-buttered cake and strong tea with plenty of cream in it.

John Treverton sat in one of the low basket arm chairs—such chairs as they make in Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire—and drank tea as if it were the elixir of life. He had a strange feeling as he sat in that chair by the open window, looking across the beds of tulips, above which the bees were humming noisily—a feeling as if his life were only just beginning; as if he were a child in his cradle, dimly conscious of the dawning of existence; no burdens on mind or conscience; no tie or encumbrance; no engagement of honour or faith; a dead blank behind him; and before him life, happiness, the glory and freshness of earth, love, home, all things which fate reserves for the man born to good luck.

This dream or fancy of his was so pleasant that he let it stay with him while he drank three cups of tea, and while Celia rattled on about Hazlehurst

and its inhabitants, giving him what she called a social map of the country, which might be useful for his guidance during the week he proposed to spend there. He only roused himself when the church clock chimed the three-quarters, and then he pulled himself out of the basket chair with a jerk, put down his cup and saucer, and wished Laura good-bye.

'I shall have to do the distance in ten minutes, Miss Clare,' he said, as he shook hands with that vivacious young lady.

'I'm afraid I ought to have said ten minutes for a bicycle,' replied Celia, 'but the Sampsons won't mind waiting dinner for you, and I don't suppose the delay will hurt their dinner.'

'It will be nearer for you through the orchard,' said Laura.

So John Treverton went through the orchard, at the end of which there was a gate that opened into a lane leading to the high road. It was the same lane which skirted the walled fruit garden, with the little door that John had seen mysteriously opened that winter night. The sight

of the little wooden door made him curiously thoughtful.

'I'll never believe that there was anything approaching guilt in that mystery,' he said to himself. 'No, I have looked into those lovely eyes of hers, and I believe her incapable of an unworthy thought. Some poor relation, I daresay —a scamp whom she would have been ashamed of before the servants, so she received him secretly; doubtless, to help him with money.

* * * * *

'What an extraordinary girl you are, Laura,' said Celia, draining the teapot. 'Why did you never tell me that John Treverton was so perfectly lovely?'

'My dear Celia, how am I to know what constitutes your idea of perfect loveliness in a young man? I have heard you praise so many, all distinctly different. I told you that Mr. Treverton was gentlemanlike and good-looking.'

'Good-looking,' cried Celia, 'he is absolutely perfect. To see him sitting in that chair drinking tea and looking dreamily out of the garden with

those exquisite eyes of his! Oh, he is quite too awfully nice. Do you know the colour of his eyes?'

'I have not the slightest idea.'

'They are a greeny-grey—a colour that changes every minute, a tint between blue and brown; I never saw it before. And his complexion—just that olive paleness which is so positively delightful. His nose is slightly irregular in line, not straight enough to be Grecian, and not curved enough to be aquiline — but his mouth is awfully nice — so firm and resolute-looking, yet lapsing now and then into dreamy thought. Did you see him lapse into dreamy thought, Laura?'

Miss Malcolm blushed indignantly; vexed, no doubt, at such foolishness.

'Really, Celia, you are too ridiculous. I can't think how you can indulge in such absurd raptures about a strange man.'

'Why not about a strange man?' asked Celia with her philosophical air. 'Why should the perfections of a strange man be a forbidden subject? One may rave about a landscape; one may

be as enthusiastic as one likes about the stars or the moon, the sea, or a sunset, or even the last popular novel! Why must not one admire a man? I am not going to put a padlock upon my lips to flatter such an absurd prejudice. As for you, Laura, it is all very well to sit there stitching at that faded blackberry leaf—you are putting too much brown in it I am sure—and looking the image of all that is demure. To my mind you are more to be envied than any girl I ever heard of, except the Sleeping Beauty in the Wood.'

'Why should I be envied?'

'Because you are to have a splendid fortune, and John Treverton for your husband.'

'Celia, I shall be so grateful to you if you will be quite silent on that subject, supposing that you can be silent about anything.'

'I can't,' said Celia, frankly.

'It is by no means certain that I shall marry Mr. Treverton.'

'Would you be so utterly idiotic as to refuse him?'

'I would not accept him unless I could believe that he really liked me—better than any other woman he had ever seen.'

'And, of course he will; of course he does,' cried Celia. 'You know, as a matter of personal inclination, I would much rather you should marry poor Edward, who adores the ground you walk upon, and, of course, adores you much more than the ground. But there is a limpness about Ted's character which makes me fear that he will never get on in the world. He is a clever young man, and he thinks that he has nothing to do but go on being clever, and write verses for the magazines—which even I, as his sister, must confess are the weakest dilution of Swinburne—and that Fame will come and take him by the hand, and lead him up the steps of her temple, while Fortune will meet him in the portico with a big bag of gold. No, Laura, dearly as I love Ted, I should be sorry to see you sacrifice a splendid fortune, and refuse such a man as John Treverton.'

'There will be time enough to debate the question when Mr. Treverton asks me to marry him,' said Laura, gravely.

'Oh, that will come upon you all in a moment,' retorted Celia, 'when you won't have me to help you. You had better make up your mind beforehand.'

'I should despise Mr. Treverton if he were to make me an offer before he knew a great deal more of me than he does now. But I forbid you to talk any more of this, Celia. And now we had better go and walk in the orchard for half an hour or you will never be able to digest all the cake you have eaten.'

'What a pity digestion should be so difficult, when eating is so easy,' said Celia.

And then she went dancing along the garden paths with the airy lightness of a nymph, who had never known the meaning of indigestion.

Once more John Treverton drove round his late kinsman's estate, and this second time, in the sweet spring weather, the farms and homesteads, the meadows where the buttercups were beginning to show golden among the grass, the broad sweeps of arable land where the young corn was growing tall—seemed to him a hundredfold more fair than they

had seemed in the winter. He felt a keener longing to be the master of all these things. It seemed to him as if no life could be so sweet as the life he might lead at Hazlehurst Manor, with Laura Malcolm for his wife.

The life he might lead——if——

What was that 'if' which barred the way to perfect bliss?

There was more than one obstacle, he told himself gloomily, as he paced the elm avenue on the London-road, one evening at sunset, after he had been at Hazlehurst more than a week, during which week he had seen Laura very often.

There was, among many questions, the doubt as to Laura's liking for him. She might consider herself, constrained to accept him, were he to offer himself, in deference to the wish of her adopted father; but could he ever feel sure that she really cared for him, that he was the one man upon earth whom she would choose for her husband?

A flattering whisper which crept into the ear of his mind, like a caressing breath of summer wind gently fanning his cheek, told him that he

was already something nearer and dearer to this sweet girl than the ruck of mankind; that her lovely hazel eyes took a new light and colour at his coming, that their beauty was shadowed with sadness in the moment of parting from him; that there were tender broken tones of voice, fleeting blushes, half smiles, sudden droopings of darkly-fringed eyelids, and many other more subtle signs, that told of something more than common friendship. Believing this, what had he to do but snatch the prize.

Alas, between him and the light and glory of life stood a dark forbidding figure, a veiled face, an arm sternly extended to stop the way.

'It is not to be thought of,' he said to himself. 'I honour her too much—yes, I love her too well. The estate must go, and she and I must go on our several ways in the wilderness of life—to meet by chance, perhaps, half a century hence, when we have grown old, and hardly remember each other.'

It was to be his last evening at Hazlehurst, and he was going to the Manor-house to bid

Laura and her friend good-bye. A very simple act of politeness, assuredly, yet he hung back from the performance of it, and walked slowly up and down under the elm trees, smoking a meditative cigar, and chewing the cud of fancies which were mostly bitter.

At last, just when the topmost edge of the sinking sun dropped below the dark line of distant woods, John Treverton made up his mind there was no more time to be lost, if he meant to call at the Manor-house that evening. He quickened his pace, anxious to find Laura in the garden, where she spent most of her life in this balmy spring weather. He felt himself more at ease with her in the garden than when he was brought face to face with her within four walls. Out of doors there was always something to distract attention, to give a sudden turn to the conversation if it became embarrassing to either of them. Here, too, it was easier to escape Celia's searching eye, which was so often upon them indoors, where she had very little to occupy her attention.

He went in at the lodge gate, as usual unquestioned. All the old servants agreed in regarding him as the future owner of the estate. They wondered that he asserted himself so little, and went in and out as if he were nobody. The way to the old Dutch garden was by this time very familiar to him. He had been there at almost every hour of the day, from golden noon to grey evening.

As he went round by the house he heard voices, a man's voice among them, and the sound of that masculine voice was not welcome to his ear. Celia's shrill little laugh rang out merrily, the sky-terrier yapped in sympathy. They were evidently enjoying themselves very much in the Dutch garden, and John Treverton felt as if their enjoyment were an affront to him.

He turned the angle of the house, and saw the group seated on a little lawn in front of the book-room windows; Laura and Celia in rustic chairs, a young man on the grass at their feet, the dog dancing round him. John Treverton guessed at once that the young man was the Edward, or Ted,

about whom he had heard Celia Clare so often discourse; the Edward Clare who, according to Miss Sampson, was in love with Laura Malcolm.

Laura half rose to shake hands with her guest. Her face at least was grave. *She* had not been laughing at the nonsense which provoked Celia's mirth. John Treverton was glad of that.

'Mr. Clare, Mr. Treverton.'

Edward Clare looked up and nodded—a rather supercilious nod John thought, but he did not expect much friendliness from the Vicar's son. He gave the young man a grave bow, and remained standing by Laura's chair.

'I hope you will forgive my late visit, Miss Malcolm,' he said. 'I have come to wish you "good-bye."'

She glanced up at him with a startled look, and he fancied—yes, he dared to fancy—that she was sorry.

'You have not stopped long at Hazlehurst,' she said, after a palpable pause.

'As if anyone would who was not absolutely obliged,' cried Celia. 'I can't imagine how Mr. Treverton has existed through an entire week.'

'I assure you that I have not found my existence a burden,' said John, addressing himself to Celia. 'I shall leave Hazlehurst with deep regret.'

He could not for worlds, in his present mood, have said as much to Laura.

'Then you must be one of two things,' said Celia.

'What things?'

'You must be either a poet, or intensely in love. There is my brother here. He never seems tired of roaming about Hazlehurst. But then he is a poet, and writes verses about March violets, and the first leafbuds on the willows, and the reappearance of the May-fly, or the return of the swallow. And he smokes no end, and he reads novels to an extent that is absolutely demoralising. It's dreadful to see a man dependent upon Mudie for getting through his life,' exclaimed Celia, making a face that expressed extreme contempt.

'I am not a poet, Miss Clare,' said John Treverton, quietly; 'yet I confess to having been very happy at Hazlehurst.'

He stole a glance at Laura to see if the shot

told. She was looking down, her sweet, grave face pure and pale as ivory in the clear evening light.

'It's very civil of you towards the parish to say as much,' said Edward with a veiled sneer, 'and it is kind of you to shrink from wounding our feelings as aborigines, but I am sure you must have been ineffably bored. There is positively nothing to do at Hazlehurst.'

'I suppose that's why the place suits you, Ted?' observed Miss Clare, innocently.

The conversation had an uncomfortable tone which was quite out of harmony with the soft evening sky, and shadowy garden, where the flowers were losing their colour as the light declined. John Treverton looked curiously at the man he knew to be his rival.

He saw a man of about six-and-twenty, of the middle height, slim almost to fragility, yet with a compactness of form which indicated activity and possibly strength. Grey eyes inclining to blue, long lashes, delicately pencilled eyebrows, a fair, complexion, low narrow brow, and regular features, a pale brown moustache, more silky than abundant,

made up a face that was very handsome in the estimation of some people, but which assuredly erred on the side of effeminacy. It was a face that would have suited the velvet and brocade of one of the French Henry's minions, or the lovelocks and jewel-broidered doublet of one of James Stuart's silken favourites.

It would have been difficult to imagine the owner of that face doing any good or great work in the world, or leaving any mark upon his time, save some petty episode of vanity, profligacy, and selfishness in the memoirs of a modern St. Simon.

'Anything new in the evening papers?' asked Mr. Clare, with a stifled yawn.

The languid enquiry followed upon a silence that had lasted rather too long to be pleasant.

'Sampson had not got his *Globe* when I left him,' answered John Treverton; 'but in the present stagnation of everything at home and abroad I confess to feeling very little interest in the evening papers.'

'I should like to have heard if that unlucky dancer is dead,' said Celia.

John Treverton, who had been standing beside Laura's chair like a man lost in a waking dream, turned suddenly at this remark.

'What dancer?' he asked.

'La Chicot. Of course you have seen her dance. You happy Londoners see everything under the sun that is worth seeing. She is something wonderful, is she not? And now I suppose I shall never see her.'

'She's a very handsome woman, and a very fine dancer, in her particular style,' answered Treverton. 'But what did you mean just now when you talked about her death. She is as much alive as you and I are, at least I know that her name was on all the walls and she was dancing nightly when I left London.'

'That was a week ago,' said Celia. Surely you saw the account of the accident in this morning's *Times*. There was nearly a column about it.'

'I did not look at the *Times*. Mr. Sampson and I started early this morning for a long round. What was this accident?'

'Oh, quite too dreadful,' exclaimed Celia. 'It

made my blood run cold to read the description. It seems that the poor thing had to go up into the flies, or the skies, or something, hooked on to some moveable irons—a kind of telescopic arrangement, you know.'

'Yes, yes, I know,' said Treverton.

'Well, of course that would be awfully jolly as long as it was safely done, for she must look lovely floating upwards, with the lime-light shining on her; but it seems the man who had the management of the iron machine got tipsy, and did not know what he was doing, so the irons were not properly braced together, and just as she was near the top the thing gave way and she came down headlong.'

'And was killed?' asked John Treverton breathlessly.

'No, she was not killed on the spot, but her leg was broken—a compound fracture, I think they call it, and she was hurt about the head, and the paper said she was altogether in a very precarious state. Now I have noticed that when a newspaper says that a person is in a precarious

state, the next thing one hears of that person is that he or she is dead; so that I shouldn't at all wonder if La Chicot's death were in the evening papers.'

'What a loss to society,' sneered Edward Clare. 'I think you are the most ridiculous girl in the world, Celia, to interest yourself in people who are as far off your groove as if they were the inhabitants of the moon.'

'*Homo sum*,' said Celia, proud of a smattering of Latin, the crumbs that had fallen from her brother's table, 'and all the varieties of mankind are interesting to me. I should like to have been a dancer myself, if I had not been a clergyman's daughter. It must be an awfully jolly life.'

'Delightful,' exclaimed Edward, 'especially when it ends abruptly through the carelessness of a drunken scene shifter.'

'I must say good-night and good-bye,' said John Treverton to Laura. 'I have my portmanteau to pack ready for an early start to-morrow morning. Indeed, I am inclined to go by the mail to-night. It would save me half a day.'

'The mail leaves at a quarter-past ten. You'll have to look sharp if you travel by that,' said Edward.

'I'll try it, at any rate.'

'Good-night, Mr. Treverton,' said Laura, giving him her hand.

The lively Celia was not going to let him depart with so cold a farewell. He was a man, and as such, eminently interesting to her.

'We'll all walk to the gate with you,' she said, 'it will be better for us than sitting yawning here, watching the bats skimming across the flower beds.'

They all went, and it happened somehow, to John Treverton's tremulous delight, that Laura and he were side by side, a little behind the other two.

'I am sorry you are obliged to leave so soon,' said Laura, anxious to say something vaguely civil.

'I should go away more happy than I can tell you, if I thought my going could make you sorry.'

'Oh, I did not mean in such a particular sense,'

she said, with a little laugh. 'I am sorry for your own sake that you have to leave the country, just when it is so lovely, and to go back to smoky London.'

'If you knew how I hate that world of smoke and all foul things, you would pity me with the uttermost compassion your kind heart can feel,' he answered, very much in earnest. 'I am going from all I love to all I detest; and I know not how long it may be before I can return; but if I should be able to come quickly will you promise me a kindly welcome, Laura? Will you promise to be as glad of my return as I am sorry to go to-night.'

'I cannot make any such bargain,' she said, gently, 'for I cannot measure your sadness to-night. You are altogether a mysterious person. I have not even begun to understand you. But I hope you may come back soon, when our roses are in bloom and our nightingales are singing, and if their welcome is not enough for you I will promise to add mine.'

There was a tender playfulness in her tone

which was unspeakably sweet to him. They were quite alone, in a part of the carriage drive where the trees grew thickest, the shadow of chestnut leaves folding them round, the low breath of the evening wind whispering in their ears. It was an hour for tender avowals, for unworldly thoughts.

John Treverton took Laura's hand, and held it unreproved.

'Tell me that you do not hate the memory of my cousin Jasper because of that absurd will,' he said.

'Could I hate the memory of one who was so good to me, the only father I ever knew?'

'Say then that you do not hate me because of my cousin's will.'

'It would be very unchristianlike to hate you for an act of which you are innocent.'

'No doubt, but I can imagine a woman hating a man under such circumstances. You take away your hand. Yes, I feel convinced that you detest me.'

'I took away my hand because I thought

you had forgotten to let it go,' said Laura, determined not to be too serious. 'Will it really make you more satisfied with yourself if I tell you that I heartily forgive my adopted father for his will?'

'Infinitely.'

'And that, in spite of our ridiculous position towards each other, I do not quite—hate you.'

'Laura, you are making me the happiest of men.'

'But I am saying very little.'

'If you knew how much it is to me. A world of hope, a world of delight, an incentive to high thoughts and worthy deeds, a regeneration of body and soul.'

'You are talking wildly.'

'I am wild with gladness. Laura, my love, my darling.'

'Stop,' she said, suddenly, turning to him with earnest eyes, very pale in the dim light, now completely serious. 'Is it me or your cousin's estate you love? If it is the fortune you think of let there be no stage play of love-making be-

tween us. I am willing to obey your cousin—as I would have obeyed him living, honouring him and submitting to him as a father—but let us be true and loyal to each other. Let us face life honestly and earnestly, and accept it for what it is worth. Let us be faithful friends and companions, but not sham lovers.'

'Laura, I love you for yourself and yourself only. As I live that is the truth. Come to me to-morrow penniless, and tell me that Jasper Treverton's will was a forgery. Come to me and say, "I am a pauper like yourself, John, but I am yours," and see how fond and glad a welcome I will give you. My dearest, I love you truly, passionately. It is your lovely face, your tender voice, yourself I want.'

He put his arm round her, and drew her, not unwilling, to his breast, and kissed her with the first lover's kiss that had ever crimsoned her cheek.

'I like to believe you,' she said softly, resting contentedly in his arms.

This was their parting.

CHAPTER VIII.

'DAYS THAT ARE OVER, DREAMS THAT ARE DONE.'

THERE was excitement and agitation in Cibber Street, Leicester Square, that essentially dramatic, musical, and terpsichorean nook in the great forest of London. La Chicot had narrowly escaped death. It had been all but death at the moment of the accident. It might be absolute death at any hour of the night and day that followed the catastrophe. At least this is what the inhabitants of Cibber Street told each other, and they were one and all as graphic and as full of detail as if they had just left La Chicot's bedside.

'She has never stirred since they laid her in her bed,' said the shoemaker's wife, at the dingy shop for ladies' boots, two doors from the Chicot domicile; 'she lies there like a piece of wax-work, pore thing, and every five minutes they takes and wets her lips with a feather dipped in

brandy; and sometimes she says "more, more," very weak and pitiful!'

'That looks as if she was sensible, at any rate,' answered the good woman's gossip, a letter of lodgings at the end of the street.

'I don't believe it's sense, Mrs. Bitters; I believe it's only an inward craving. She feels that low in her inside that the brandy's a relief to her.'

'Have they set her leg yet?'

'Lord love you, Mrs. Bitters, it's a compound fracture, and the swelling ain't begun to go down. They've got a perfessional nurse from one of the hospitals, and she's never left off applying cooling lotion, night or day, to keep down the inflammation. The doctor hasn't left the house since it happened.'

'Is it Mr. Mivart?'

'Lor, no; it's quite a stranger; a young man that's just been walking the orspital, but they say he's very clever. He was at the Prince Frederick when it happened, and see it all; and helped to bring her home, and if she was a duchess he couldn't be more careful over her.'

'Where's the husband?' asked Mrs. Bitters.

'Away in the country, no one knows where, for she hasn't sense to tell 'em, pore lamb. But from what Mrs. Evitt tells me, they was never the happiest of couples.'

'Ah!' sighed Mrs. Bitters, with an air of widest worldly experience, 'dancers and such like didn't ought to marry. What do they want with 'usbands, courted and run after as they are? Out every night too, like Tom cats. 'Ow can they make a 'ome 'appy?'

'I can't say as I ever thought Mr. Chicot 'ad a 'appy look,' assented the shoemaker's wife. 'He's got a way of walking with his eyes on the ground and his hands in his pockets, as if he didn't take no interest in life.'

Thus, and in various other manners, was the evil fate of La Chicot discussed in Cibber Street, and the surrounding neighbourhood. Everybody was interested in her welfare. If she had been some patient domestic drudge, a devoted wife and mother, the interest would have been mild in comparison, the whole thing tame and common-

place. But La Chicot — whose name was on the walls in capitals three feet high, whose bold bright face smiled on the foot passenger at every turn in the road—La Chicot was a personage, and whether she was to draw the lot of life or death from fate's mysterious urn was a public question.

It had been as the scene-shifter had shrewdly prophesied. She had been drunk, and the stage-carpenter had been drunk, and the result had been calamity. There had been a perennial supply of champagne in La Chicot's dressing-room during the last week, thanks to the liberality of an anonymous admirer, who had sent a three-dozen case of Roederer, pints — fascinating little gold-tipped bottles that looked as innocent as flowers or butterflies. La Chicot had an idea that a pint of champagne could hurt nobody. Of a quart she opined, as the famous glutton did of a goose, that it was too much for one and not enough for two.

She naturally suspected that the anonymous champagne came from the unknown giver of the bracelet, but she was not going to leave the case unopened on that account. It was very pleasant

to have an admirer who gave so freely and asked nothing. Poor fellow! It would be time enough to snub him when he became obtrusive. In the meanwhile she accepted his bounty as unquestioningly as she received the gifts of all-bounteous nature—the sun that warmed her, the west wind that fanned her cheek, the wallflowers and primroses at the street corners that told her spring was abroad in the land.

Yet she was a woman, and, therefore, naturally curious about her nameless admirer. Her splendid eyes roamed among the faces of the audience, especially among the gilded youth in the stalls, until they alighted on a countenance which La Chicot believed likely to be the one she sought. It was a face that watched her with a grave attention she had seen in no other countenance, though all were attentive — a sallow face, of a Jewish type, black eyes, an almost death-like pallor, a firmly-moulded mouth, the lips too thick for beauty, black hair, smooth and sleek.

'That is the man,' La Chicot said to herself, 'and he looks inordinately rich.'

She stole a glance at him often after this, and she always saw the same expression in the pallid Israelitish face, an intensity she had never seen in any other countenance.

'C'est un homme à parvenir,' she told herself, 'si ça était guerrier il aurait vaincu un monde, comme Napoleon.'

The face fascinated her somehow, or, at all events, it made her think of the man. She drank his champagne with greater gusto after this, and on the night after her discovery, the weather being unusually sultry for the season, she drank two bottles in the course of her toilet. When she went down to the wings, glittering with silvery tinsel, clad in a cloud of snowy gauze, she could hardly stand; but dancing was a second nature with her, and she managed to get through her solos without disgrace. There was a certain wildness, an extra audacity, a shade too much of that peculiar quality which the English call 'go,' and the French call 'chic,' but the audience at the Prince Frederick liked extremes, and applauded her to the echo.

'By Jove, she's a wonderful woman,' exclaimed

Mr. Smolendo, watching her from the prompter's entrance. 'She's a safe draw for the next three seasons.'

Ten minutes afterwards came the ascent through the coral caves. The ironwork creaked, groaned, trembled, and then gave way. There was a shrill scream from the dancer, a cry of horror from the men at the wings, and La Chicot was lying in the middle of the stage, a confused heap of tumbled gauze and silver, silent and unconscious, while the green curtain came down with a run.

It was late on the night after the accident when Jack Chicot came home. He found his wife lying in a dull stupor, as the gossips had described her, life sustained by the frequent administration of brandy. The woman was as near death as she could be without being ready for her grave. A stranger was sitting by her bedside when Jack went into the room, a young man with a gravity of face and manner which was older than his years. The nurse was on the other side of the bed, applying a cooling lotion to La Chicot's burning forehead. The

leg had been successfully set that afternoon, by one of the cleverest surgeons in London, and was suspended in a cradle, under the light coverlet.

Jack went to the bedside, and bent over the motionless figure, and looked at the dull white face.

'My poor Zaïre, this is bad,' he murmured, and then he turned to the stranger, who had risen and stood beside him. 'You are the doctor, I suppose?'

'I am the watch-dog, if you like. Mr. Smolendo would not trust my inexperience with so delicate an operation as setting the broken leg. It was a terrible fracture, and required the highest art. He sent for Sir John Pelham, and everything has been done well and successfully. But he allowed me to remain as surgeon in charge. Your wife's state is perilous in the extreme. I fear the brain is injured. I was in the theatre when the accident happened. I am deeply interested in this case. I have lately passed my examination creditably, and am a qualified practitioner. I shall be glad if you will allow me to attend your wife—under Pelham, of course. It is not a question of remuneration,' the

young man added hurriedly. 'I am actuated only by my professional interest in Madame Chicot's recovery.'

'I have no objection to my wife's profiting by your generous care, provided always that Sir John Pelham approves your treatment,' answered Chicot, in a calmer tone than George Gerard expected from a man who had just come home after a week's absence to find his wife in peril of death. 'Do you think she will recover?'

This question was asked deliberately, with intense earnestness. Gerard saw that the eyes which looked at him were watching for the answering look in his own eyes, waiting as for the sentence of doom.

That look set the surgeon wondering as to the relations between husband and wife. A minute ago he had wondered at Chicot's coldness —a tranquility that seemed almost indifference. Now the man was all intensity. What did the change mean?

'Am I to tell you the truth?' asked Gerard.

'By all means.'

'Remember I can give you only my opinion. It is an obscure case. The injury to the brain is not easily to be estimated.'

'I will take your opinion for what it is worth. For God's sake be candid.'

'Then in my opinion the chances are against her recovery.'

Jack Chicot drew a long breath, a strange shivering sigh, which the surgeon, clever as he was, knew not how to interpret.

'Poor thing!' said the husband, after a brief silence, looking down at the dull, blank face, 'and three years ago she and I came out of the Mairie very happy, and loving each other dearly! *C'est dommage que c'est si passager, ça.*'

These last words were spoken too low for Gerard to hear. They were a brief lament over a love that was dead.

'Tell me about the accident,' said Jack Chicot, sitting down in the chair Gerard had vacated. 'You were in the theatre, you say. You saw it all.'

'I did, and it was I who picked your wife up. I was behind the scenes soon enough for that

The panic-stricken wretches about were afraid to touch her.'

Gerard told everything faithfully. Jack Chicot listened with an unchanging face. He knew the worst that could be told him. The details could make little difference.

'I said just now that in my opinion the chances were against your wife's recovery,' said Gerard, full of earnestness, 'but I did not say the case was hopeless. If I thought it were I should not be so anxious to undertake the care of your wife. I ask you to let me watch her because I entertain the hope—a faint hope at present, I grant—of curing her.'

Jack Chicot gave a little start, and looked curiously at the speaker.

'You must be tremendously in love with your profession, to be so anxious about another man's wife?' he said.

'I am in love with my profession. I have no other mistress. I desire no other!'

'Well, you may do all you can to snatch her from the jaws of death,' said Chicot. 'Let her

have her chance, poor soul. That is only fair. Poor butterfly! Last night the star of a crowded theatre, the focus of every eye; to night to lie thus, a mere log, living and yet dead. It is hard.'

He walked softly up and down the room, deep in thought.

'Do you know I implored her to refuse that ascent,' he said. I had a foreboding that harm would come of it.'

'You should have forbidden it,' said the surgeon, with his fingers on the patient's wrist.

'Forbidden! You don't know my wife.'

'If I had a wife she should obey me.'

'Ah! that's a common delusion of bachelors. Wait till you have a wife, and you will tell a different story.'

'She will do for to-night,' said Gerard, taking up his hat, yet lingering for one long scrutiny of the white expressionless face on the pillow. 'Mrs. Mason knows all she has to do; I will be here at six to-morrow morning.'

'At six! You are an early riser.'

'I am a hard worker. One is impossible

without the other. Good-night, Mr. Chicot; I congratulate you upon your power to take a great trouble quietly. There is no better proof of strong nerve.'

Jack fancied there was a hidden sneer in this parting compliment, but it made very little impression upon him. The perplexity of his life was big enough to exclude every other thought. 'You had better go to bed, Mrs. Mason,' he said to the nurse. 'I shall sit up with my wife.'

'I beg your pardon, sir, I could not feel that I was doing my duty if I indulged myself with a night's rest while the case is so critical; by-and-bye I shall be thankful to get an hour's sleep.'

'Do you think Madame Chicot will ever be better?'

The nurse looked down at her white apron, sighed gently, and as gently shook her head.

'We always like to look at the bright side of things, sir,' she answered,

'But is there any bright side to this case?'

'That rests with Providence, sir. It is a very bad case.'

'Well,' said Jack Chicot, 'we must be patient.'

He seated himself in the chair by the bedside and remained there all night, never sleeping, hardly changing his attitude, sunk to the bottom of some deep gulf of thought.

Day came at last, and soon after daybreak came George Gerard, who found no change either for better or worse in his patient, and ordered no change in the treatment.

'Sir John Pelham is to be here at eleven,' he said. 'I shall come at eleven to meet him.'

The great surgeon came, made his inspection, and said that all was going on well.

'We shall make her leg sound again,' he said, 'I have no fear about that; I wish we were as certain about the brain.'

'Do you think the brain is seriously hurt?' asked Chicot.

'We can hardly tell. The iron struck her head as she fell. There is no fracture of the skull, but there is mischief of some kind—rather serious mischief, I fear. No doubt a good deal will depend

on care and nursing. You are lucky to have secured Mrs. Mason; I can highly recommend her.'

'Frankly, do you think my wife will recover?' asked Chicot, questioning Sir John Pelham to day as earnestly as he had questioned George Gerard last night.

'My dear sir, I hope for the best; but it is a bad case.'

'That must mean that it is hopeless,' thought Chicot, but he only bowed his head gently, and followed the surgeon to the door, where he tried to slip a fee into his hand.

'No, no, my dear sir, Mr. Smolendo will arrange that little matter,' said the surgeon, rejecting the money, 'and very properly too, since your wife was injured in his service.'

'I would rather have paid her debts myself,' answered Chicot, 'though Heaven knows how long I could have done it. We are never very much beforehand with the world. Oh, by the way, how about that young man upstairs, Mr. Gerard? Do you approve his treatment of the case?'

'Very much so; a remarkably clever young man

—a man who ought to make rapid way in his profession.'

Sir John Pelham gave a compassionate sigh at the end of his speech, remembering how many young men he had known deserving of success, and how few of them had succeeded, and thinking what a clever and altogether commendable young man he must himself have been to be one of the few.

After this Jack Chicot allowed Mr. Gerard to prescribe for his wife with perfect confidence in the young man's ability. Sir John Pelham came once a week, and gave his opinion, and sometimes made some slight change in the treatment. It was a lingering, wearying illness, hard work for the nurse, trying work for the watcher. The husband had taken upon himself the office of night nurse. He watched and ministered to the invalid every night, while Mrs. Mason enjoyed four or five hours' sleep. Mr. Smolendo had suggested that they should have two nurses. He was willing to pay for anything that could ameliorate the sufferer's condition, though La Chicot's accident had almost

ruined his season. It had not been easy to get a novelty strong enough to replace her.

'No,' said Jack Chicot, 'I don't want to take more of your money than I can help; and I may as well do something for my wife. I'm useless enough at best.'

So Jack went on drawing for the comic periodicals, and worked at night beside his wife's bed. Her mind had never awakened since the accident. She was helpless and unconscious now as she had been when they brought her home from the theatre. Even George Gerard was beginning to lose heart, but he in no way relaxed his efforts to bring about a cure.

In the day Jack went for long walks, getting as far away from that close and smoky region of Leicester Square as his long legs would take him. He tramped northward to Hampstead and Hendon, to Highgate, Barnet, Harrow; southward to Dulwich, Streatham, Beckenham; to breezy commons where the gorse was still golden, to woods where the perfume of pine trees filled the warm, still air; to hills below which he saw

London lying, a silent city, wrapped in a mantle of blue smoke.

The country had an inexpressible charm for him at this period of his life. He was not easy till he had shaken the dust of London off his feet. He who a year ago in Paris had wasted half his days playing billiards in the entresol of a *café* on the boulevard St. Michel, or sauntering the stony length of the boulevards from the Madeleine to the Chateau d'Eau—was now a solitary rambler in suburban lanes, choosing every path that led him furthest from the haunts of men.

'You are always out when I come in the daytime, Mr. Chicot,' said Gerard, one evening, when he had called later than usual and found Jack at home, dusty, tired after his day's ramble. 'Is not that rather hard on Madame Chicot?'

'What can it matter to her? She does not know when I am here; she is quite unconscious.'

'I am not so sure of that. She seems unconscious, but beneath that apathy there may be some struggling sense of outward things. It is my

hope that the mind is there still, under a dense cloud.'

The struggle was long and weary. There came a day on which even George Gerard despaired. The wound in the leg had been slow to heal, and the pain had weakened the patient. Despite all that watchful nursing could do, she had sunk to the lowest ebb.

'She is very weak, is she not?' asked Jack, that summer afternoon—a sultry afternoon late in June, when the close London street was like a dusty oven, and faint odours from stale strawberries and half-rotten pineapples on the costermonger's barrows tainted the air with a sickly sweetness.

'She is as weak as she can be and live,' answered Gerard.

'You begin to lose faith?'

'I begin to fear.'

As he spoke he saw a look of ineffable relief flash into Jack Chicot's eyes. His own eyes caught and fixed that look, and the two men stood facing each other, one of them knowing that the secret of his heart was discovered.

'I fear,' said the surgeon, deliberately, 'but I am not going to leave off trying to save her. I mean to save her life if it is in human power to save it. I have set my heart upon it.'

'Do your utmost,' answered Chicot. 'Heaven is above us all. It must be as fate wills.'

'You loved her once, I suppose?' said Gerard, with searching eyes still on the other's face.

'I loved her truly.'

'When and why did you leave off loving her?'

'How do you know that I have ever done so?' asked Chicot, startled by the audacity of the question.

'I know it as well as you know it yourself. I should be a poor physician for an obscure disease of the brain if I could not read your secret. This poor creature, lying here, has for some time past been a burden and an affliction to you. If Providence were to remove her quietly, you would thank Providence. You would not lift your hand against her, or refuse any aid you can give her, but her death would be an infinite relief. Well,

I think you will have your wish. I think she is going to die.'

'You have no right to talk to me like this,' said Chicot.

'Have I not? Why should not one man talk freely to another, uttering the truth boldly. I do not presume to judge or to blame. Who among us is pure enough to denounce his brother's sin? But why should I pretend not to understand you? Why affect to think you a loving and devoted husband? It is better that I should be plain with you. Yes, Mr. Chicot. I believe this business is going to end your way, and not mine.'

Jack stood looking gloomily out of the open window down into the dingy street, where the strawberry barrow was moving slowly along, while the costermonger's brassy voice brayed out his strange jargon. He had no word to answer to the surgeon's plain speaking. The accusation was true. He could not gainsay it.

'Yes, I loved her once,' he said to himself presently, as he sat by the bedside after George Gerard had gone. 'What kind of love was it I wonder?

I felt my life a failure, and had abandoned all hope of ever getting back into the beaten tracks of respectability, and it seemed to me to matter very little what I did with my life or what kind of woman I married. She was the handsomest woman I had ever seen, and she was fond of me. Why should I not marry her? Between us we could manage to live somehow, *au jour la journée*, from hand to mouth. We took life lightly, both of us. Those were pleasant days. Yet I look back and wonder that I could have lived in the gutter and revelled in it. How even a gentleman can sink when once he ceases to respect himself. When did I first begin to be weary? When did I begin to hate her? Never till I had met ——. Oh, Paradise, which I have seen through the half-opened gate, shall I verily be free to enter your shining fields, your garden of gladness and delight?'

He sat by the bed in thoughtful silence, till the nurse came in to take his place, and then he went out into the dusty streets, and walked northward in search of air. He had promised the nurse to be back at ten o'clock, when she could have her supper

and go to bed, leaving him in charge for the night. This was the usual routine.

'All may be over when I go home to-night,' he said to himself, and it seemed to him as if the past few years—the period of his married life—were part of a confused dream.

It was all over now. Its follies and its joys belonged to the past. He could look back and pity his wife and himself. Both had been foolish, both erring. It was done with. They had come to the last page of a volume that was speedily to be closed for ever. He could forgive, he could pity and deplore all that foolish past, now that it was no longer to fetter the future.

He rambled far that day—he was lighter of foot—the atmosphere out of London was clearer, or it seemed clearer, than usual. He walked to Harrow, and lay on the grass below Byron's tomb, looking dreamily down at the dim world of London.

It was after eleven when he got back to Cibber Street. The public house at the corner was closed, the latest of the gossips had deserted their door-steps. He looked up to the first-floor windows,

La Chicot's bed had been moved into the front room, because it was more cheerful for her, the nurse said; but it was Mrs. Mason and not La Chicot who looked out of the window. The sickly yellow light shone through the dingy blind, just as it always did after dark. There was nothing to indicate any change. But all things would be the same, no doubt, if death were in the room.

As Jack stood on the doorstep feeling in his pockets for the key, the door opened, and Desrolles, the second-floor lodger, came out.

'I am going to see if I can get a drop of brandy at the Crown and Sceptre,' he said, explanatorily; 'I've had one of my old attacks.'

Mr. Desrolles was a sufferer from some chronic complaint which he alluded to vaguely, and which necessitated frequent recourse to stimulants.

'The Crown and Sceptre is closed,' said Jack. 'I've some brandy upstairs; I'll give you a little.'

'That's uncommonly good-natured of you,' said Desrolles. 'I should have a night of agony if I couldn't get a little brandy somewhere. How late you are!'

'I've walked further than usual. It was such a fine evening.'

'Was it really? Hereabouts it was dull and grey. I thought we were going to have a thunderstorm. Local, I suppose. I've got some good news for you.'

'Good news for me. The rarity of the thing will make it welcome.'

'Your wife's better, decidedly better. I looked in two hours ago to enquire. The nurse thinks she has taken a turn. Mr. Gerard was here at eight, and thinks the same. It's wonderful. She rallied in an extraordinary manner between three and five o'clock, took her nourishment with an appearance of appetite for the first time since she has been ill. Mrs. Mason is delighted. Wonderful, isn't it?'

'Very wonderful!' exclaimed Jack Chicot: and who shall tell the bitterness of heart with which he turned from the shining vision of the future—the vision that had been with him all that evening, back to the dreary reality of the present.

He found Mrs. Mason elated. She had never seen a more marked change for the better.

'She's as weak as a new-born infant, poor dear,' she said of her patient, 'but it's just as if life was coming gently and slowly back, like the tide coming in over the sands when it has ebbed as low as ever it can ebb.'

The improvement continued steadily from that hour. The brain, so long clouded, awakened as from sleep. Zaïre recovered her strength, her senses, her beauty, her insolence and audacity. Before September she was the old 'Chicot,' the woman whose portrait had flaunted on all the walls of London. Mr. Smolendo was in raptures. The broken leg was as sound as ever it had been. La Chicot would be able to dance early in November. A paragraph announcing this fact had already gone the round of the papers. Another paragraph, more familiar in tone, informed the town that Madame Chicot's beauty had gained new lustre during the enforced retirement of her long illness. Mr. Smolendo knew his public.

CHAPTER IX.

'AND ART THOU COME! AND ART THOU TRUE!'

It was late in November, and the trees were bare in the grounds of Hazlehurst Manor. The grand old mansion wore its air of grave diginity, under the dull, grey skies of late autumn, but the charms and graces of summer had gone, and there was a shade of melancholy in the stillness of the house and garden, and that pleasant enclosure, too big for a meadow, and too small for a park, over which the rooks swept like a black cloud at evensong, going screaming home to their nests in the tall elms behind the house.

In this dreary season of the year, Laura Malcolm was living quite alone at the Manor-house. Celia Clare had been invited to spend a month with a well-to-do aunt at Brighton, and Brighton in the winter season represented the highest form of terrestrial bliss that had ever

come within Celia's experience. She had vague dreams of Paris, as of a city that must far surpass even Brighton in blissfulness; but she had no hope of seeing Paris, unless, indeed, she were to get married, when she would insist on her husband taking her there for the honeymoon.

'Of course, the poor creature would do anything I told him then,' said Celia, 'It would be different afterwards. I dare say when we had been married a year he would try to trample on me.'

'I can't imagine anyone trampling upon you, Celia,' said Laura, laughing.

'Well, I think I should make it rather difficult for him. But all men are tyrants. Look at papa, for instance; the best of men, with a heart of gold; but let the cook make a failure, and he goes on all dinner-time like the veriest heathen. Oh, they are altogether an inferior breed, believe me. There is your young man, Laura—very handsome, very gentlemanlike, but as weak as water.'

'Whom do you mean by my young man?' asked Laura.

'You know, or you would not blush so violently. Of course I mean John Treverton, your future husband. And, by-the-bye you are to be married within a year after old Mr. Treverton's death. I hope you have begun to order your trousseau.'

'I wish you would not talk such nonsense, Celia. You know very well that I am not engaged to Mr. Treverton. I may never be engaged to him.'

'Then what were you two talking about that night under the chestnuts, when you lingered so far behind us?'

'We are not engaged. That is quite enough for you to know.'

'Then, if you are not engaged you ought to be. That is all I can say. It is ridiculous to leave things to the last moment, if you are ever so sure of each other. Old Mr. Treverton died early in January, and it is now late in November. I feel quite uncomfortable about going away,

and leaving your affairs in such an unsatisfactory state.'

Celia, who was the most frivolous of beings, affected a talent for business, and assumed an elder-sister air towards Laura Malcolm that was pleasant in its absurdity.

'You need not be uneasy, Celia. I can manage my own affairs.'

'I don't believe you can. You are awfully clever, and have read more books than I have ever seen the outside of in the whole course of my life. But you are not the least little bit practical or business-like. You run the risk of losing this dear old house, and the estate that belongs to it, as coolly as if it were the veriest trifle. I begin to be afraid that you have a sneaking kindness for that worthless brother of mine.'

'You need have no such fear. I feel kindly towards your brother for auld lang syne, and because I think he likes me——'

'As well as he can afford to like anybody, taking into account the small residue of affection

that remains over and above his great regard for himself,' interjected Celia, contemptuously.

'But I have no feeling for him warmer than a commonplace friendship. I never shall have.'

'Poor Ted! I am sorry for his sake, but I am very glad for yours.'

Celia went off to Brighton radiant with three trunks and two bonnet boxes, and the Manor-house sank suddenly into silence and gloom. Celia's small frivolities were often troublesome, but her perennial gaiety of temper had pleasantly enlivened the spacious unpeopled house. Her fun was a mere school-girl's fun, perhaps, at best, but it was genuine, the spontaneous outcome of animal spirits and a happy disposition. Celia would have chatted as merrily over a cup of tea and a herring in a garret at five shillings a week, as amidst the flesh pots of Hazlehurst Manor. She was a joyous, improvident, idle creature, with the unreasoning love of life for its own sake which makes a Neapolitan beggar happy in the sunshine, and an English gipsy contented under the low arch of his canvas tent, on the patch of waste grass by the

wayside, whence he may be driven at any moment by a relentless constable.

Celia was gone, and Laura had ample leisure for serious meditation. In the first few days she was glad to be alone, to be free to think her own thoughts, to have no fear of encountering the keen glance of Celia's penetrating eyes; not to see that canary head, perched on one side with an air of insufferable knowingness. Then, after a little while, a deep melancholy crept over her spirits, a bitter sense of disappointment, which she could not banish from her mind.

She had never forgotten that long leave-taking in the avenue. Surely, if anything could mean an engagement, the words spoken then, the kiss taken then, meant the most solemn engagement. Yet since that night six months had passed and John Treverton had made no sign. And in all that time his image had but rarely been absent from her thoughts. Day after day, hour after hour, she had expected to see him enter the garden, unannounced, as when she had seen him from the yew tree archway, standing looking

quietly round him at the spring flowers and the smiling sunny lawn, where the shadows of the trees came and went like living things, where the earliest bees were humming, and the first of the butterflies skimming over beds of red and yellow tulips.

She had seen him every day during his last visit to the Sampsons, and that one week of friendly companionship had brought them very near together. In all that time he had said no word about the curious position which they occupied towards each other, and she had admired the delicacy of mind to which she ascribed this reticence. It seemed to her that no word ought to be said till the final word which fulfilled Jasper Treverton's wish and united their two destinies for ever. And Laura saw no reason why that word should not be spoken in due time. She fancied that John Treverton liked her. He was somewhat fitful in his spirits during that week of sun and shower, variable as the weather; at times wildly gay, capping Celia's maddest joke with one still madder; on other occasions lapsing into gloom,

which provoked Celia to protest that he must have committed a murder in his early youth, and that the memory of his crime was haunting him.

'Just like Eugene Aram,' she had said; 'now positively, Laura, he is like Eugene Aram; and I feel convinced that somebody's bones are bleaching in a cave ready to be put together like the pieces of a puzzle, and to appear against him at the predestined moment. Don't marry him, Laura. I'm sure there is some dreadful burden on his conscience.'

They had been infinitely happy together, in the most artless fashion, with the unthinking gladness of children whose calculations never travel beyond the present moment. Perhaps it was the delicious April weather, which spread a warm glaze of sunny yellow over the earth, and bathed the young leaves in vivid light, and painted the sky an Italian blue, and set the blackbirds and throstles singing from an hour before sunrise to an hour after sundown. This might in itself be enough for happiness. And then there was youth, a treasure so rich that none of us have ever learned

to measure its value, till we have lost it; when we look back and lament it, as perhaps, after all is said, the dearest of all those dear friends we have buried; for was it not this which made those others so deeply dear?

Whatever the cause, those three, and more especially those two, had been happy. And yet after that week of innocent intimacy, after that parting kiss, John Treverton had remained away for more than half a year, and not by so much as a letter had he assured Laura that she still held a place in his heart and mind.

She thought of him now with bitterest self-reproach. She was angry with herself for having let her heart go out to him, for having made the tacit engagement involved in that farewell kiss.

'After all it is only the fortune he cares about,' she said to herself, 'and after my foolishness that night he fancies himself so secure of me that he can stay in London and enjoy life in his own way, and then come and claim me at the last moment, just in time to fulfil the con-

ditions of his cousin's will. He is making the most of his last year of liberty. He will have no more of me than the law obliges him to have. The year has nearly gone, and he has given me one little week of his society. A cool lover, certainly. A hypocrite, too, for he put on looks and tones that seemed like deepest, strongest love. A gratuitous hypocrisy,' pursued Laura, lashing herself to sharper scorn, 'for I implored him to be frank with me. I offered him a loyal friendly alliance. But he is a man, and I suppose it is man's nature to be false. He preferred to declare himself my lover, forgetting that his conduct would belie his words. I will never forgive him. I will never forgive myself for being so easily deceived The estate shall go to the hospital. If he were here to-morrow, kneeling at my feet, I would refuse him. I know the hollowness of his pretended love. He cannot fool me a second time.'

She had never been vain of her beauty. The secluded life she had led with her adopted father had left her simple as a cloistered nun in all her thoughts and habits. Edward Clare had told her

that she was lovely, many times, and had praised her loveliness in his verses, with all the affectation, and some of the licence of that new school of poets of which he was an obscure member; but Laura had received all such praises as the effervescence of the poet's frothy intellect rather than as a just tribute to her charms. Now, full of anger against John Treverton, she looked in her glass one winter night and wondered if she were really beautiful.

Yes, if the Guido in the dining-room below was beautiful—if features of purest modelling, dark hazel eyes, and a clear complexion faintly flushed with delicate carnation—if sculptured eye-lids, darkly fringed, a mouth half sad, half scornful, and dimples that showed momentarily in the mockery of a self-contemptuous smile—if these meant beauty, Laura Malcolm was assuredly beautiful. She was too true an artist not to know that this was beauty which smiled at her bitterly from the darkness of the glass.

'Perhaps I am not his style,' she said, with a little laugh. 'I have heard Edward Clare say

that of girls I have praised. "Yes, she is very well, but not my style," as if Providence ought to have had him in view whenever it created a pretty woman. "Not my style," Edward would drawl languidly, as much as to say, "and therefore a failure."'

Every idea of John Treverton now remaining in Laura's mind was a thought of bitterness. She was so angry with him that she could not give him credit for one worthy act or one honourable feeling. As nearly as a soul so generous could hate did she now approach to the sin of hatred.

This was her mood one day in the beginning of December, indeed it had been her mood always for the last three months; but in the leisure of her late solitude her anger had intensified. This was her mood as she walked in the garden, in the cold sunshine, looking at the pale prim faces of the fading crysanthemums,—the perky china asters lending the last touch of bright colour to the dying year —the languorous late roses, flaunting their sickly beauty, like ball-room belles who refused to bow their heads to the sentence of time. It was a morn-

ing of unusual mildness: the arrow point of the old-fashioned vane pointed south-west; the leaves of the evergreen oaks were scarcely ruffled by the wind; the tall Scotch firs, red and rugged columns topped by masses of swart foliage, stood darkly out against a calm, clear sky.

This garden was Laura's chief delight in her loneliness. God had gifted her with that deep and abiding love of nature, which is perhaps one of His richest gifts. They who possess it can never be utterly joyless.

She had walked in garden and orchard for more than an hour, when she came back by the old yew tree arch, and, just in the spot where she had seen him more than half a year ago, she saw John Treverton standing again to-day.

What an unstable thing is a woman's anger against the man she loves. Laura's first feeling at sight of John Treverton was indignation. She was on the point of receiving him with crushing politeness, of freezing him with coldest courtesy, when she perceived that he looked ill and careworn, and was gazing at her with eyes full of yearning tender-

ness. Then she forgot her wrongs in one moment, and went up to him and gave him her hand, saying gently,—

'What have you been doing with yourself all this time?'

'Knocking about London, doing very little good for myself or anyone else,' he answered frankly.

Then he seemed to lose himself in the delight of being with her. He walked by her side, saying never a word, only looking at her with fond, admiring eyes; as if she had come upon him suddenly, like a revelation of hitherto unknown loveliness and delight.

At last he found a voice, but not for any brilliant utterance.

'Are you really just a little glad to see me again?' he asked. 'Remember, you promised me a welcome.'

'You have been in no haste to claim the fulfilment of my promise. It was made more than six months ago. You have had other welcomes in the meanwhile, no doubt, and have forgotten all about Hazlehurst Manor.'

'The Manor-house, and she who occupies it, have never been absent from my thoughts.'

'Really; and yet you have stayed away so long. That looks rather like forgetfulness.'

'It was not forgetfulness. There have been reasons—reasons I cannot explain.'

'And do they no longer exist?'

'No,' he gave a long sigh, 'they are at an end now.'

'You have been ill, perhaps,' speculated Laura, looking at him with a solicitude she could not wholly conceal.

'I have been far from well. I have been working rather harder than usual. I have to earn my bread, you know, Laura.'

'Have you any profession now that you have left the army?' asked Laura.

'I left the army six years ago. I have managed to live by my own labour since that time. My career has been a chequered one. I have lived partly by art, partly by literature, and have not succeeded in winning a name in either profession. That does not sound a brilliant account, does it?

Its only merit is truth. I am nobody. Your generosity and my cousin Jasper's will may make me somebody. My fate depends on you.'

This was hardly the tone of a lover. It was a tone that Laura's pride would have resented had she not inwardly believed that John Treverton loved her. There is a subtle power in the love which keeps silence mightier than all love's eloquence. A hand that trembles when it touches another, one swift look from loving eyes, a sigh, a tone, will tell more than an oration. John Treverton was the most reticent of lovers, yet his reserve did not offend Laura.

They went into the grave old house together, and sat down to luncheon, *tête à tête*, waited upon by Trimmer, the old butler, who had lived more than thirty years with Jasper Treverton, and had lifted Laura out of the carriage when his master brought her to the manor a delicate child, looking wistfully round at strange objects with wide-opened eyes.

'They looked just for all the world like man and wife,' said Trimmer, when he went back to

his pantry, 'and I hope before long it'll be that. They'll make a fine couple, and I'm sure they're fond o' one another already.'

'It isn't in Miss Laura to marry a man she wasn't fond of, not for all the fortunes in Christendom,' retorted Mrs. Trimmer, who had been cook and housekeeper nearly as long as her husband had been butler.

'Well, if I was young woman I'd marry a'most anybody rather than I'd lose such a 'ome as Hazlehurst Manor,' answered Trimmer. 'I ain't a money-grubber, but a good 'ome aint to be trifled with. And if they don't marry, and the estate goes to build a norsepital, what's to become of you and me? Some folks in our position would be all agog for setting up in the public line and making our fortunes, but I've seen more fortunes lost than won that way, and I know when I'm well off. Good wages paid reg'lar, and everything found for me, is all I ask.'

After luncheon Laura and John went for a walk in the grounds. A mutual inclination led them to the shrubbery where they had parted that April

night. The curving avenue of good old trees made a pleasant walk even at this season, when not a green leaf was left, and the ragged crows' nests showed black amidst the delicate tracery of the topmost branches. The air was even milder than in the morning. It might have been an afternoon early in October. John Treverton stopped in front of the rugged trunk of the great chestnut under which Laura and he had parted. The young leaves had made a canopy of shade that night; now the big branches stood out dark and bare, stained with moss and weather. The grass at the foot of the tree was strewn with green husks and broken twigs, dead leaves, and shining brown nuts.

'I think it was at this spot we parted,' said John. 'Do you remember?'

'I have a vague recollection that it was somewhere about here,' Laura answered, carelessly.

She knew the spot to an inch, but was not going to admit as much.

He took her hand, and drew it gently through his arm, as if they were starting upon a pilgrimage somewhere, then bent his head and kissed the

delicate bare hand—a lovely tapering hand that could only belong to a lady, a hand which was in itself something for a lover to adore.

'Darling, when are we to be married?' he asked softly, almost in a whisper, as if an unspeakable shyness took hold of him at that critical moment.

'What a question,' cried Laura, with pretended astonishment. 'Who has ever talked about marriage? You have never asked me to be your wife.'

'Did I not? But I asked you if you were angry with your adopted father for his will, and you said No. That was as much as to say you were content we should gratify the good old man's wish. And we can only do so by becoming man and wife. Laura, I love you more than I can ever say, and loving you as I do, though I am conscious of many shortcomings—yes, though I know myself in many respects unworthy to be your husband—a pauper—unsuccessful—without name or fame — less than nobody—still, darling, I fall upon my knees here, at your feet; I, who never knelt to a woman before,

and have too seldom knelt to my God, and sue to you in *forma pauperis*. Perhaps in all England there lives no man less worthy to be your husband, save for the one merit of loving you with all his heart and soul.'

He was kneeling before her, bareheaded, at the foot of the old chestnut tree, among the rugged roots that curved in and out amidst the grass. Laura bent down, and touched his forehead with her lips. It was hardly a kiss. The sweet lips fluttered on his forehead for an instant and were gone. No butterfly's wing was ever lighter.

'I will take you, dear,' she said gently, 'with all your faults, whatever their number. I have a feeling that I can trust you—all the more, perhaps, because you do not praise yourself. We will try to do our duty to each other, and to our dead benefactor, and to use his wealth nobly, shall we not, John?'

'*You* will use it nobly, love; you can do nothing that is not noble,' he answered, gravely.

He was pale to the lips, and there was no gladness in his look, though it was full of love.

CHAPTER X.

ENGAGED.

JOHN TREVERTON stayed at the Manor-house till after dark, alone with his betrothed, and happier than he had ever been in his life. Yes, happy, though it was with a desperate happiness as of a child plucking wild flowers on the sunny edge of an abyss. He must have been something less or more than human if he had not been happy in Laura Malcolm's company to-day, as they sat by the fire in the gloaming, side by side, her head leaning against his shoulder, his arm round her waist, her dark eyes hidden under drooping lids as they gazed dreamily downward at the smouldering logs; the room lit dimly by the fire-glow, grotesque shadows coming and going on the wall behind them, like phantom forms of good or evil angels hovering near them as they sat face to face with fate, the one unconscious of all danger, the other reckless and defiant.

Now that the word had been spoken, that they two were pledged to each other to the end of life, Laura let her heart go out to her lover without reserve. She was not afraid to let him see her fondness. She did not seek to make her love more precious to him by simulated coldness. She gave him all her heart and soul, as Juliet gave herself to Romeo. Lips that had never breathed a word of love, now murmured sweetest words in his ear; eyes that had never looked into a lover's eyes gazed and lost themselves in the depths of his. Never was lover more innocently or unreservedly adored. If he had been boastful or self-assertive, Laura's pride would have taken alarm. But his deep humility, and a shadow of melancholy which hung over him even when he seemed happiest, asked for her pity; and a woman is never better pleased with her lover than when he has need of her compassion.

'And do you really love me, Laura?' he asked, his face bent over the beautiful head which seemed to have found so natural a resting place upon his shoulder. 'If there had been no such thing as my

cousin Jasper's will, and you and I had met in the outside world, do you think I am the man your heart would have chosen?'

'That is too abstruse a question in metaphysics,' she answered, laughingly. 'I only know that my heart chose you, and that papa's will—I must call him by the old name—did not influence my choice. Don't you think that is quite enough for you to know?'

'It is all I desire to know, my loveliest. Or not quite all. I should like to know—out of mere idle curiosity—when you first began to think me not altogether despicable.'

'Do you want the history of the case from the very beginning?'

'From the eggs to the apples, from the very first instant when your heart began to beat a little more kindly for me than for all the rest of the world.'

'I will tell you——'

She paused, and looked up at him with a smile of innocent coquetry.

'Yes, dearest.'

'When you have told me the history of your life, from the instant when I became more to you than the common herd of women.'

His first answer was a deep sigh.

'Ah, dear love, my case was different. I struggled against my passion.'

'Why?'

'Because I felt myself unworthy of you.'

'That was foolish.'

'No, dear, it was wise and right. You are like a happy child, Laura; your past is a blank page, it has no dark secrets——'

He felt her trembling as he spoke. Had his words frightened her? Did she begin to divine the dangers that hemmed him around?

'Dearest, I don't want to alarm you: but in the past experience of a man of my age there is generally one page he would give ten years of his life to cancel. I have a dark page. Oh, my love, my love, if I felt myself really worthy of you my heart would hardly hold my happiness. It would break with too great a joy. Men's hearts have so broken. When did I begin to love you? Why,

on the night I first entered this house—the cheerless winter night, when I came, like the prodigal son, weary of the husks and the stye, vaguely yearning for some better life. Your thrilling eyes, your grave, sweet smile, your tender voice, came upon me like a revelation of a new world, in which womanhood meant goodness and purity and truth. My senses were as yet unmoved by your beauty; my mind reverenced your goodness. You were no more to me than a picture in a gallery, but you thrilled my soul as the picture might have done; you awakened new thoughts, you opened a door into heaven. Yes, Laura, admiration, reverence, worship, those began on the first night. Before I left Hazlehurst, worship had warmed into passionate love.'

'Yet you stayed away from January to April?'

'My absence was one long conflict with my love.'

'And from April to December——after——'

'After you had shown me your heart, dear love, and I knew that you might be mine. That last absence needed a more desperate courage.

Well, I came back, you see. Love was stronger than wisdom.'

'Why must it be unwise for us to love each other?'

'Only because of my unworthiness.'

'Then we will forget your unworthiness, or, if your modesty likes better, I will love you and your unworthiness too. I do not suppose you a faultless paragon, John. Papa told me that you had been extravagant and foolish. You will not be extravagant and foolish any more, will you, dear, when you are a sober, married man?'

'No, love.'

'And we will both strive to do all the good we can with our large fortune.'

'You shall be the chief disposer of it.'

'No, no, I would not have it so on any account. You must be lord and master. I shall expect you to be quite the ideal country squire, the sun and centre of our little universe, the general benefactor. I will be your prime minister and adviser, if you like. I know all the poor people for ten miles round, on our estate, and on

other people's land. I know their wants and their weaknesses. Yes, John, I think I can help you in doing much good; in making improvements that will not ruin you, and will make the lives of the labouring people much happier.'

> 'Being your slave, what should I do but tend
> Upon the hours and times of your desire?
> I have no precious time at all to spend,
> Nor services to do, till you require.'

quoted John, tenderly. 'Can I ever be happier than in obeying you?'

'Do you know that it will be a great happiness to me not to leave the Manor,' said Laura, presently. 'You must not think me mercenary, or that I value a big house and a large fortune. It is not so, John. I could live quite contentedly on the income papa left me, more than contentedly, in a cottage with you; but I love the Manor for its own sake. I know every tree in the grounds, and have watched them all growing, and sketched and painted them until I almost know the form of every branch. And I have lived so long in these old rooms that I doubt if

any other rooms would ever look like home. It is a dear old house, is it not, John? Will you not be very proud when you are the master of it.'

'I shall be very proud of my wife when I can dare to call her mine. That will be pride enough for me,' answered John, drawing her a little nearer to his heart. 'And now, I suppose, I ought to go and see Sampson, and tell him that everything is definitely settled. When are we to be married, love? My cousin died on the 20th of January. We ought not to delay our marriage longer than the end of this month.'

'Let us be married on the last day of the month,' said Laura. 'It is the most solemn day in all the year. We shall never forget the anniversary of our wedding if it is on that day.'

'I should never forget it in any case,' answered John Treverton. 'Let it be on that day, love. The closing year shall unite me to you for life. I shall see Mr. Clare to-night, and arrange everything.'

They were a long time saying 'Good-bye,' and just at the last John Treverton suggested that

Laura should put on her hat and jacket and walk to the gates with him, so the first 'Good-bye' was wasted trouble. They were a long time walking to the gates, and the early winter night had come, and the stars were shining when they reluctantly parted. Laura tripped along the avenue with as light a foot as Juliet's when she came to the friar's cell to be married; John Treverton went slowly down the road towards Hazlehurst village, with his head bent upon his breast, and all the joy faded out of his face.

He found Mr. Sampson and his sister just sitting down to dinner, and was welcomed with enthusiasm by both.

'Upon my soul, you're a most extraordinary fellow,' exclaimed the lawyer, after a good deal of handshaking. 'You run off in no end of a hurry, promising to come back in a week or two at latest, and for six months we see no more of you; and you don't even favour your family solicitor with a line to say why you don't come. There are not many men in England who would play fast and loose with such chances as yours.

Your cousin, when he made that curious will of his, told me you had been wild, but I was not prepared for such wildness as this.'

'Really, Tom,' remonstrated Miss Sampson, blushing the salmon pink peculiar to sandy-haired beauty, 'you have no right to talk to Mr. Treverton like that.'

'Yes, I have,' answered Sampson, who prided himself on his open manner—his 'bonnomy,' as he called it; 'I have the right given me by a genuine interest in his affairs—the interest of a friend rather than a lawyer. You don't suppose it's for the sake of the six-and-eightpences I take so much upon myself, Lizzie? No, it is because I have a sincere regard for my old client's kinsman, and a disinterested anxiety for his welfare.'

'I think you may make your mind easy about me,' said John, without any appearance of elation; 'I am going to be married on the last day of this month, and I want you to prepare the settlement.'

'Bravo!' cried Tom Sampson, flourishing his napkin; 'I'm almost as glad as if I'd backed the

winner of the double event, and woke up to find myself worth twenty thousand pounds. My dear fellow, I congratulate you. The Hazlehurst property is a good eight thousand a year. There's three thousand in ground rents in Beechampton, and your dividends from railways and consols bring your income to a clean fourteen thousand.'

'If Miss Malcolm were penniless, I should be as proud of winning her as I am now,' said John, gravely.

'That's a very gentlemanlike way of looking at it,' exclaimed the lawyer, as much as to say, 'We know all about it; you are bound to say that kind of thing.'

Miss Sampson looked down at her plate, and felt that appetite was gone for ever. It was foolishness, no doubt, to feel so keen a pang; but girlhood is prone to foolishness, and Eliza Sampson had not yet owned to thirty. She had known from the first that John Treverton was to marry Laura Malcolm, and yet she had allowed herself to indulge in secret worship at his shrine. He was handsome and attractive, and Miss Sampson

had seen so few young men who were either one or the other, that she may be forgiven for fixing her young unhackneyed affection on the first distinguished stranger who came within the narrow orbit of her colourless life.

She had lived under the same roof with him; she had handed him his coffee in the morning, his tea—ah, how carefully creamed and sugared! in the evening. She had studied his tastes, and catered for him with unfailing care. She had played Rosellen's Reverie in G for his delectation every evening during his two visits. She had sung his favourite ballads, and if her voice sometimes failed her on the high notes, she made up in pathos what she wanted in power. These things are not easily to be forgotten by a youthful mind fed upon three-volume novels, and naturally prone to sentiment.

'Our wedding will be a very quiet affair,' said John Treverton, presently; 'Laura wishes it to be so, and I am of her mind. I shall be glad if you will kindly refrain from talking about it to any one, Sampson, and you too, Miss Sampson. We

don't want to be objects of interest in the village.'

'I will be as dumb as a skin of parchment,' answered the lawyer, 'and I know that Eliza will be the soul of discretion.'

Eliza looked up shyly at their guest, her white eyelashes quivering with emotion.

'I ought to congratulate you, Mr. Treverton,' she faltered, 'but it is all so sudden, so startling, that I can hardly find words.'

'My dear Miss Sampson, I know your friendly feeling towards me,' John answered, with tranquil good-nature.

Oh, how cool he was, how cruelly indifferent to her feelings! And yet he ought to have known! Had Rosellen's Reverie, with the soft pedal down, said nothing?

Later in the evening John Treverton and his host smoked their cigars *tête à tête* in Mr. Sampson's office, beside the comfortable hearth, by which the lawyer was fonder of sitting than in his sister's highly decorated drawing-room, among the starched antimacassars, and chairs that were

not to be sat on, and footstools that were intended for anything rather than the accommodation of the human foot. This unsociable habit of spending his evenings aloof from the family circle Mr. Sampson excused on the plea of business.

The two men sat opposite each other for some time in friendly silence, John Treverton gravely meditative, Mr. Sampson in an agreeable frame of mind. He was congratulating himself on the prospect of retaining his position as agent for the Treverton Estate, which profitable stewardship must have been lost to him if John Treverton had been so besotted in his folly as to forfeit his heritage by refusing to comply with the conditions of his kinsman's will.

'I want fully to understand my position,' said John, presently. 'Am I free to make what settlement I please upon my future wife?'

'You are free to settle anything which you at present possess,' answered the lawyer.

'My present possessions amount to something less than a five-pound note.'

'Then I don't think we need talk about a marriage settlement. By the terms of your cousin's will his estate is to be held in trust for a twelvemonth. If within that time you shall have married Miss Malcolm, the estate will pass into your possession at the end of the year. You can then make a post-nuptial settlement, on as liberal a scale as you please; but you cannot give away what you do not possess.'

'I see. It must be a post-nuptial settlement. Well, you may as well take my instructions at once. You can rough-draft the settlement, submit your draft to counsel, have it engrossed and ready for execution upon the day on which I pass into possession of the property.'

'You are in a desperate hurry,' said Sampson, smiling at his client's grave eagerness.

'Life is full of desperate uncertainties. I want the welfare of the woman I love to be assured, whatever fate may be mine.'

'That is a generous forethought rare in lovers. However intensely they may love in the present, their love seldom takes the form of solicitude for

the beloved one's future. Hence generation after generation of penniless widows and destitute children. After me the deluge, is your lover's motto. Well, Mr. Treverton, what do you propose to settle on your wife in this post-nuptial deed?'

'The entire estate, real and personal,' answered John Treverton, quietly.

Mr. Sampson dropped his cigar, and sat transfixed, an image of half-amused astonishment.

'This bangs Banagher,' he exclaimed, 'you must be mad.'

'No, I am only reasonable,' answered Treverton. 'The estate was left to me nominally, to Laura Malcolm actually. What was I to the testator? A blood relation, truly, but a stranger. At the time he made that will he had never seen my face; what little he had ever heard of me must have been to my disadvantage; for my life has been one long mistake, and I have given no man reason to sing my praises. What was Laura to him? His adopted daughter, the beloved and the affectionate companion of his declining years; his faithful nurse, his disinterested slave. What-

ever love he had to give must have been given to her. She had grown up by his hearth. She had sweetened and cheered his lonely life. He left his estate to me, in trust for her; so that he might keep his oath, and yet leave his wealth where his heart prompted him to bestow it. He found in me a convenient instrument for the carrying out of his wishes; and I have reason to be proud that he was not unwilling to trust me with such a charge, to give me the being he held dearest. I shall settle the whole of the estate on my wife, Sampson. I consider myself bound in honour to do so.'

Mr. Sampson looked at his client with a prolonged and searching gaze, a slow smile dawning on his somewhat stolid countenance.

'Don't be offended at my asking the question,' he said. 'Are you in debt?'

'I don't owe sixpence. I have lived a somewhat Bohemian life, but I have not lived upon other people's money.

'I am glad to hear that,' said Sampson, selecting a fresh cigar from a comfortably-filled case, 'because

if you imagine that by such a settlement as you propose you could escape the payment of any debts now existing, you are mistaken. A man can make no settlement to the injury of his creditors. As regards future liability the case would be different, and if you were deeply involved in commerce, a speculator, I could understand your desire to shift the estate from your own shoulders to your wife's. But as it is——'

'Can't you understand something not strictly commercial?' exclaimed John Treverton, waxing impatient? 'Can't you understand that I want to obey the spirit as well as the letter of my cousin Jasper's will? I want to make his adopted daughter the actual mistress of the estate, in the same position she would have naturally occupied had he never made that foolish vow.'

'In so doing you make yourself a pensioner on her bounty.'

'So be it. I am content to occupy that position. Come, my dear Sampson, we need not argue the question any further. If you won't draw up the form of settlement I want, I must find a lawyer who will.'

'My dear sir,' cried Tom Sampson, briskly, 'when a client of mine is obstinately bent upon making a fool of himself, I always see him through his folly. He had better make a fool of himself in my hands than in anyone elses. I do not suffer by the loss of his business, and I am vain enough to believe that he suffers less than he would if he took his business to any other office. If you have quite made up your mind, I am ready to rough-draft any form of settlement you dictate; but I am bound to warn you that the dictation of such a settlement is a qualification for Bedlam.'

'I will risk even as much as that. Nobody need know anything about the settlement but you and I, and, later, my wife. I shall not speak of it to her until it is ready for execution.'

Mr. Sampson, in a chronic state of wonder, took half a quire of slippery blue foolscap, and began his draft, with a very squeaky quill pen and a large consumption of ink. Simple and uniform as the gift was which John Treverton wished to make to his wife, the transfer of it required to be hedged round and intertwined with so much legal phraseology

that Tom Sampson had consumed his half-quire of foolscap before he came to the end of the draft. The estate had to be scheduled, and every homestead and labourer's cottage had to be described in a phrase of abstract grandeur, as 'all that so and so, commonly known as so and so,' and so forth, with almost maddening iteration. John Treverton, smoking his cigar, and letting his thoughts wander away at a tangent every now and then to regions that were not always paths of pleasantness, thought his host would never leave off driving that inexorable quill—the sort of pen to sign a death-warrant and feel none the worse for it—over the slippery paper.

'Come,' exclaimed Sampson, at last, 'I think that ties the estate up pretty tightly on your wife and her children after her. She can squander the income as she pleases, and play old gooseberry up to a certain point, but she can't put the tip of her little finger on the principal. And now you have only to name two responsible men as trustees.'

'I don't know two respectable men in the world,' said John, frankly.

'Yes, you do. You know the vicar of this parish, and you know me. Your cousin Jasper considered us worthy to be trustees to his will. You need hardly be afraid to make us trustees to your marriage settlement.'

'I have no objection, and I certainly know no better men.'

'Then we'll consider it settled. I'll send the deed to counsel by to-morrow's post. I hope you quite understand that this settlement will make you a pauper—wholly dependent upon your wife. If you were to throw yourself on the parish, she would have to maintain you. Bar that, she may use you as badly as she likes.'

'I am not afraid of her ill-usage.'

'Upon my honour and conscience,' mused Thomas Sampson, as he laid himself down to rest that night. 'I believe John Treverton is over head and ears in love with Miss Malcolm. Nothing but love or lunacy can explain his conduct. Which is it? Well, perhaps the line that divides the two is only a distinction without a difference.'

CHAPTER XI.

NO TROUSSEAU.

LAURA was utterly happy in the brief interval between her betrothal and her wedding. She had given her love and trust unreservedly, feeling that duty and love went hand in hand. In following the inclination of her heart she was obeying the behest of her benefactor. She had been very fond of Jasper Treverton, had loved him as truly as ever daughter loved a father. It seemed the most natural process to transfer her love from the adopted father to his young kinsman. The old man in his grave was the bond of union between the girl and her lover.

'How pleased papa would have been if he could have known that John and I would be so fond of each other,' she said to herself, innocently.

Celia Clare hurried back from Brighton, eager to assist her friend at this momentous crisis of her life.

'Brighton was quite too delightful,' said Celia, 'but not for worlds would I be absent from you at such a time. Poor soul, what would you have done without me?'

'Dear Celia, you know how fond I am of you, but I think I could really have managed to get married without your assistance.'

'Get married! Yes, but how would you have done it?' cried Celia, making her eyes very round and big. 'You would have made a most horrid muddle of it. Now, what about your trousseau? I'll wager you have hardly thought of it.'

'There you are wrong. I have ordered two travelling dresses, and a handsome dinner dress.'

'And your collars and cuffs, your handkerchiefs, your peignoirs, your camisoles,' pursued Celia, enumerating a string of articles.

'My dear child, do you suppose I have lived all these years, without cuffs and collars, and handkerchiefs?'

'Laura, unless you have everything new you might just as well not be married at all.'

'Then you may consider my marriage no mar-

riage, for I am not troubling myself about new things.'

'Give me carte blanche and leave everything to me. What is the use of my sacrificing Brighton just when it was more than too enchanting, unless I can be of some use to you?'

'Well, Celia, in order that you may not be unhappy, I will give you permission to review my wardrobe, and if you find an alarming dearth of collars and handkerchiefs I'll drive you to Beechampton in the pony carriage, and you shall buy whatever you think proper.'

'Beechampton is hideously behind the age, disgustingly *démodé*, and your things ought to be in the latest style. I'll look through the advertisements in the *Queen*, and send to London for patterns. It is no use having new things if they are not in the newest fashion. One does not wear out one's cuffs and collars—they go out.'

'You shall have carte blanche, dear, if it will atone for the loss of Brighton.'

'My dearest girl, you know I would not desert you at such a crisis of your life for forty Brightons,'

cried Celia, who had lofty ideas about friendship; 'and now about your wedding gown? That is the most important point of all.'

'It is ordered.'

'You did not mention it just now.'

'Did I not? I am going to be married in one of the gowns I ordered for travelling, a mixture of grey silk and velvet, the jacket trimmed with chinchilla. I think it will be very handsome.'

Celia fell back in her chair as if she were going to faint.

'No wedding gown!' she cried; 'no trousseau, and no wedding gown! This is indeed an ill-omened marriage! Well may poor Edward talk.'

Laura flushed indignantly at this last sentence.

'Pray what has your brother been saying against my marriage?' she asked, haughtily.

'Well, dear, you cannot expect him to feel particularly pleasant about it, knowing—as you must know—how he has gone on doting upon you, and hoping against hope, for the last three years. I don't want to make you unhappy, but I must

confess that Edward has a very bad opinion of Mr. Treverton.'

'I daresay Mr. Treverton will manage to exist without Edward's good opinion.'

'He thinks there is something so utterly mysterious in his conduct—something insulting to you in the fact of his holding himself aloof so long, and then coming back at the last moment, just in time to secure the estate!'

'I am the best judge of Mr. Treverton's conduct,' answered Laura, deeply wounded. 'If I can trust him other people may spare themselves the trouble of speculating upon his motives.'

'And you can trust him?' asked Celia, anxiously.

'With all my heart and soul.'

'Then have a proper wedding gown,' exclaimed Celia, as if the whole question of bliss or woe were involved in that one detail.

When next Miss Malcolm met Edward Clare there was a coolness in her greeting which the young man could not mistake.

'What have I done to offend you, Laura?' he asked, piteously.

'I am offended with everyone who doubts the honour of my future husband,' she answered.

'I'm sorry for that,' he said, gloomily. 'A man cannot help his thoughts.'

"A man can hold his tongue,' said Laura.

'Well, I will be silent henceforth. Good-bye.'

'Where are you going?'

'Anywere, anywhere out of the world; that is to say out of this little world of Hazlehurst. I think I am going to London. I shall take a lodging close to the British Museum, and work hard at literature. It is time I made my mark.'

Laura thought so too. Edward had been talking of making his mark for the last five years, but the mark as yet was a very feeble one.

Next day he was gone, and Laura had a sense of relief in his absence.

Celia stayed at the Manor House during the time before the wedding. She was always in attendance upon the lovers, drove with them, walked with them, sat by the fire with them at the cheery, dusky afternoon tea time, when those mysterious shadows that looked like guardian angels came and

went upon the walls. John Treverton seemed to have no objection to Celia's company, he rather courted it, even. He was not an ardent lover, Celia thought; and yet it would have been difficult to doubt that he was deeply in love. Never since that first evening had Laura's head rested against his breast, never since then had he given full and unrestrained utterance to his passion. His manner was full of reverent affection; as if he respected his betrothed almost too deeply to be lavish in the expression of warmer feeling; as if she stood so high above him in his thoughts of her that love was a kind of worship.

'I think I should like a more demonstrative lover,' said Celia, with a critical air. "Mr. Treverton is so awfully serious.'

'And now that you have seen more of him, Celia, are you still inclined to think that he is mercenary; that it is the estate and not me he cares for?' asked Laura, with no fear as to the answer.

'No, dear, I honestly believe that he adores you, that he is dreadfully, desperately, almost de-

spairingly, in love with you,' answered Celia, very seriously, 'but still he is not my style of lover. He is too melancholy.'

Laura had no answer to this objection. As the days had hurried on towards the end of this eventful year her lover's spirits had assuredly not grown lighter. He was full of thought, curiously absent-minded at times. She, too, grew grave in sympathy with him.

'It is such a solemn crisis in our lives,' she thought. 'Sometimes I feel as if all things could not go happily to the end, as if something must happen to part us, at the very last, on the eve of our wedding day.'

The eve of the wedding came, and brought no calamity. It was a very quiet evening. The lovers dined together at the vicarage, and walked to the Manor-house afterwards, alone with each other, almost for the first time since the night of their betrothal. Everything had been arranged for to-morrow's wedding. Such a quiet wedding! No one had been invited except Mr. Sampson and his sister. The vicar's wife was to be present, of

course. She would in a manner represent the bride's mother. Celia was to be the only bridesmaid. They were to be married by licence, and no one in the village had as yet any inkling of the event. The servants at the Manor-house had only been told the date of the marriage within the last two days, and had been forbidden to talk about it; and as they were old servants, who had long learned to identify themselves with 'the family,' they were not likely to disobey Miss Malcolm's orders.

The house, always the perfection of neatness, had been swept and garnished for this important occasion. The chintz covers had been taken off the chairs and sofas in the drawing-room, revealing tapestry wreaths and clusters of flowers, worked by Jasper Treverton's mother and aunts in a period of almost awful remoteness. The housekeeper had been baking her honest old face in front of a huge kitchen fire, while she stirred her jellies, and watched her custards, and turned her game pie. There was to be a breakfast fit for the grandest wedding, though Miss Malcolm had told Mrs.

Trimmer that a very simple meal would be wanted.

'You mustn't deny me the pleasure of doing my best, at such a time,' urged the faithful servant. 'I should feel it a reproach to me all the rest of my life, if I didn't. There shan't be no extravagance, Miss, but I must put a pretty breakfast on the table. I'm so glad our barberry bushes bore well this year. The berries make such a tasty garnish for cold dishes.'

Mrs. Trimmer was roasting herself and her poultry in the spacious old kitchen, at ten o'clock at night, while John and Laura were coming from the vicarage, arm in arm, Laura strangely glad to have him all to herself for one little half hour, he vexatiously silent. Celia was at the Manor-house, laid up with a headache and a new novel. She had excused herself from the dinner in her usual flippant style.

'Give them my love, and say I was too seedy to come,' she said. 'Going to dine with one's parent's is quite too slow. I dined with them on Christmas day, you know; and Christmas day

at the vicarage has always been the quintessence of dulness. The thing I wondered at most, when I came of age, was how I ever could have lived through twenty-one of our Christmases.'

They were thus, by happy accident, as Laura thought, alone together; and, behold! the lover, the bridegroom of to-morrow, had not a word to say.

'John,' Laura began softly at last, almost afraid to break this gloomy silence, 'there is one thing you have not told me, and yet it is what most girls in my position would call a very important matter.'

'What is that, dearest?'

'You have never told me where we are to spend our honeymoon. Celia has been worrying me with questions about our plans, and I have found it difficult to evade her. I did not like to confess my ignorance.'

A simple and a natural question surely, yet John Treverton started, as at the sharpest thrust that Fate could have at him.

'My dearest love—I—I have really not thought about it,' he answered, stumblingly. 'We will go

anywhere you like. We will decide to-morrow, after the wedding.'

'Is not that a rather unusual mode of proceeding,' asked Laura, with a faint laugh.

She was somewhat wounded by this show of indifference as to the very first stage in their journey through life. She would have liked her lover to be full of wild schemes, to be eager to take her everywhere—to the Engadine, the Black Forest, the English Lakes, Killarney, the Trossachs—all in a breath.

'Are not all the circumstances of our marriage unusual,' he replied gravely. 'There is only one thing certain, there is only one thing sweet and sacred in the whole business—we love each other truly and dearly. That is certain, is it not, Laura?'

'On my side quite certain.'

'And on my side quite as certain as that I live and that I shall die. Our love is deep and fixed, rooted in the very ground of our lives, is it not, Laura? Nothing, no stroke of time or fate can change it.'

'No stroke of time or fate can change my love for you,' she said, solemnly.

'That is all I want to know. That is the certainty which makes my soul glad and hopeful.'

'Why should it be otherwise? Were there ever two people more fortunate than you and I. My dear adopted father dies, leaving a will that might have made us both wretched, that might have tempted you to pretend a love you could not feel, me to give myself to a man I could not love. But instead of any such misery as that, we fall in love with each other, almost at first sight, and feel that Providence meant us for each other, and that we could be happy together in the deepest poverty?'

'Yes,' said John, meditatively, 'it is odd that my cousin Jasper should have been so sure we should suit each other.'

'There is a Providence in these things,' murmured Laura.

'If I could but think so,' said her lover, rather to himself than to her.

CHAPTER XII.

AN ILL-OMENED WEDDING.

The last day of the year, nature's dullest, dreariest interval between the richness of autumn and the fresh young beauty of spring. Not a flower in the prim old Manor-house garden, save a melancholy tea-rose, that looked white and wan under the dull grey sky, and a few pallid chrysanthemums, with ragged petals and generally deplorable aspect.

'What a miserable morning!' exclaimed Celia, shivering, as she looked out of Laura's dressing-room window at the sodden lawn and the glistening yew-tree hedge, beyond which stretched a dismal perspective of leafless apple-trees, and the tall black poplars that marked the boundary of the home pastures, where the pretty grey Jersey cows had such a happy time in spring and summer.

Laura and her companion were taking an early breakfast—a meal at which neither could eat—by

the dressing-room fire. Both young women were in a state of nervous agitation, but while one was restless and full of talk, the other sat pale and silent, too deeply moved for any show of emotion.

'Drip, drip, drip,' cried Celia, pettishly, 'one of those odious Scotch mists, that is as likely to last for a week as for an hour. Nice draggle-tail creatures we shall look after we have walked up that long churchyard path under such rain as this. Well, really, Laura, don't think me unkind for saying so, but I do call this an ill-omened wedding.'

'Do you?' said Laura, with a faint smile. 'Do you really suppose that it will make any difference to my future life whether I am married on a rainy day or on a fine one? I rather like the idea of going out of the dulness into the sunshine, for I know our wedded life will be full of sunshine.'

'How confident you are,' exclaimed Celia, wonderingly.

'What have I to fear? We love each other dearly. How can we fail to be happy?'

'That's all very well, but I should have been easier in my mind if you had had a wedding gown. Think how awkward it will be, by-and-bye, when you are asked to dinner parties. As a bride you will be expected to appear in ivory satin and orange blossoms. People will hardly believe in you.'

'How many dinner parties are likely to be given within ten miles of Hazlehurst during the next six months?' asked Laura.

'Not many, I admit,' sighed Celia. 'One might as well live on the Gold Coast, or at some remote station in Bengal. Of course, papa and mamma will give a dinner in your honour, and Miss Sampson will ask you to tea. Oh, Miss Sampson's teas, with the tea and coffee handed round on an electro-plated salver, and Rosellen's Reverie in G on the cracked old piano, and *vingt et un* at the loo-table, and anchovy sandwiches, blanc-mange, and jelly to wind up the wild dissipations of the evening. Then there are the county families, bounded on the east by Sir Joshua Parker, and on the north by the Dowager

Lady Barker. You will have stately calls from them. Lady Barker will regret that she has left off giving dinner parties since her lamented husband's death. Lady Parker will square accounts by sending you a card for a garden party next July.'

This conversation took place at half-past eight. At ten the two girls were dressed and ready to drive to the church. Laura looked lovely in her grey silk travelling dress, and grey Gainsborough hat, with its drooping ostrich plume.

'One thing I can honestly say, from the bottom of my heart,' exclaimed Celia, and Laura turned to her with a smile, expecting to hear something interesting; 'you have out and away the handsomest ostrich feather I ever saw in my life. You may leave it to me in your will if you like. I'm sure I took trouble enough to get it; and you ought to be grateful to me for getting your hat to match your gown so exactly.'

And now they are driving along the muddy road, between bare ranks of dark and dripping trees, and

under as dull and colourless a sky as ever roofed in Hazlehurst. The old church, with its queer corners and darksome side-aisles, its curious gallery pews in front of the organ, something like boxes at a theatre, where the aristocracy sit in privileged retirement, its hatchments, its old-fashioned pulpit, reading-desk, and clerk's desk, its faded crimson cushions and draperies — a church which the restorer's hand has never improved, for whose adornment no devout ladies have toiled and striven, the dull old-world parish church of the last century— looked its darkest and gloomiest to-day. Not even the presence of youth and beauty could brighten and enliven it.

John Treverton, and Mr. Sampson, who was to give the bride away, were the last to arrive. The bridegroom was deadly pale, and the smile with which he met his bride, though full of fondest love, was wanting in gladness. Celia performed her duty as bridesmaid in a business-like way, worthy of the highest praise. Mr. Clare read the service deliberately and well, the pale bridegroom spoke out manfully when his time came; nor did Laura's

low voice falter when she pronounced the words that sealed her fate.

The wedding breakfast was quietly cheerful. That the bridegroom should have very little to say, and that the bride should be pale and thoughtful, surprised no one. The vicar and the lawyer were in excellent spirits; Celia's lively tongue chimed in at every opportunity. Mrs. Clare was full of friendly anticipations about what the young couple would do when they settled down. The dull, damp morning had sharpened people's appetites, and there was a good deal said in praise of the game pie, and the truffled turkey; while the old wines that had been brought forth, mantled in cobwebs, from the dark recesses of Jasper Treverton's cellar, were good enough to evolve faint flashes of wit from the most sluggish brain. Thus the wedding breakfast, which had the air of a small family gathering, went off pleasantly enough.

The bride and bridegroom were not to start on their travels till after dark. They were going northward by the mail, on their way to Dover.

Very little had been said about the honeymoon. It was only vaguely understood that John Treverton and his wife were going to the South of France. The vicar had to hurry off soon after breakfast, to read the funeral service over the coffin of a venerable parishioner, and the rest of the company took their departure as a signal to disperse. There was nothing to detain them. This marriage was not as other marriages. There were to be no evening revels, there was no dazzling array of wedding gifts to stare at and talk about. Laura had so few friends that her wedding presents could have been reckoned on the fingers of the little white hand that looked so strange and wonderful in her eyes, glorified with a brand new ring, a broad and solid band of gold, strong enough to wear till her golden wedding. The few guests felt that there was nothing more for them to do but to take their leave, with much reiteration of good wishes, and cheery anticipations of the festivities which were to enliven the old house, when the honeymoon should have waned.

And now all were gone; the brief winter

day was closing, the new year was coming with hastening footsteps. Only the merest remnant of the old year remained. How silent the house was in the winter gloaming, silent with an almost death-like stillness. Laura and Celia had spun out their parting to the last moment, lingering together in the hall long after the rest had gone. Celia had so much to say, so many injunctions about cuffs and collars, and the times and seasons at which Laura was to wear her various gowns. And then there were little gushes of affection, hugs and squeezes.

'You won't care one iota for me now you've a husband,' murmured Celia.

'You know better, you silly girl. My marriage will not make the slightest difference in my feelings.'

'Oh, but it always does,' said Celia, with an experienced air. 'When a man marries the friends of his bachelor days go to the wall; everybody knows that; and it's just the same thing with a girl. I expect to find myself nowhere.'

Laura declared she would always be true to

friendship, and thus they parted, Celia running home by herself, with all her wedding finery smothered under a waterproof Ulster. The rain had ceased by this time, and there was the red gleam of a wintry sunset in the west.

The hall-door shut with a clang that echoed in the silence of the house, and Laura went slowly back to the drawing-room, wondering a little to find herself alone in the gloom of twilight on her wedding day. It was altogether so different from the ordinary idea of a wedding—this delayed departure, this uncomfortable interval between the festivity of the wedding breakfast and the excitement of the wedding journey.

She found the drawing-room empty. She had left John Treverton there with Mr. Sampson half an hour ago, when she went upstairs to assist in packing Celia in the waterproof, and now both were gone. The spacious room, splendid with an old-fashioned splendour, was lighted only by the fading wood fire. The white panelled walls and antique mirrors had a ghostly look; the shadowy corners were too awful to contemplate.

'Perhaps I shall find him in the study,' Laura said to herself. 'It is kettledrum time.'

She laughed softly to herself. How new, how strange it would be to sit down *tête à tête* at the oval tea-table, man and wife, settled in domesticity for life, no further doubt of each other or of their fate possible to either—the bargain made, the bond sealed, the pledge given, that could be broken only by death.

She went slowly through the silence of the house to the room at the end of the corridor, the little book-room opening into the flower garden. She opened the door softly, meaning to steal in and surprise her husband in some pleasant reverie, but on the threshold she stopped appalled, struck dumb.

He was sitting in an attitude of deepest dejection, his forehead resting on his folded arms, his face hidden. Sobs, such as but seldom come from the agonised heart of a strong man, were tearing the heart of John Treverton. He had given himself up, body and soul, to the passion of an unconquerable despair.

Laura ran to him, bent over him, drew her arm gently round his neck.

'Dearest, what is amiss?' she asked, tenderly, with trembling lips. 'Such grief, and on such a day as this! Something dreadful must have happened. Oh, tell me, love, tell me.'

'I can tell you nothing,' he answered, hoarsely, putting her arm away as he spoke. 'Leave me, Laura. If you pity me, leave me to fight my battle alone. It is the only kindness you can show me.'

'Leave you, and in such grief as this! No, John, I have a right to share your sorrow. I will not go till you have confided in me. Trust me, love, trust me. Whom can you trust, if not your wife?'

'You don't know,' he gasped, almost angrily. 'There are griefs you cannot share—a depth of torture you can never fathom. God forbid that your pure young soul should ever descend into that black gulf. Laura, if you love, if you pity me—and indeed, dear love, I need all your pity—leave me now for a little while; leave me to finish

my struggle alone. It is a struggle, Laura, the fiercest this weak soul of mine has ever passed through. Come back in an hour, dear, and then —you will know— I can explain—some part, at least, of this mystery. In an hour, in an hour,' he repeated, with increasing agitation, pointing with a wavering hand to the door.

Laura stood for a moment or so, irresolute, deeply moved, her womanly dignity, her pride as a wife, hurt to the quick. Then, with a smile, half sad, half bitter, she softly quoted the gentle speech of Shakespeare's gentlest heroine :—

> 'Shall I deny you? No: Farewell, my lord.
> Whate'er you be, I am obedient.'

And with those words she left him, full of painful wonder.

If she could have seen the agonized look he turned upon her as she left him ; if she could have seen him start and shiver as the door closed upon her, and rise and rush to the door, and kneel down and press his lips upon the insensible panel her hand had touched, and beat his forehead against the dull wood in a paroxysm of despair, she might

have better estimated the strength of his love and the bitterness of his grief.

She went to her own room, and sat wondering helplessly at this trouble and mystery that had come down like a sudden storm-cloud upon the brightness of her new life. What did it mean? Had all his professions of love been false? Had he bound himself to her for the sake of his cousin's fortune, despite all his protestations to the contrary? Did he love someone else? Was there some older, dearer tie that made this bond of to-day intolerable to him? Whatever the cause of his repentance it was clear to Laura's mind that her husband of a few hours bitterly repented his marriage. Never surely had such deep humiliation fallen upon a woman.

She sat in the firelit dressing-room, looking straight before her, numbed and helpless in her grief and humiliation. Reflection could throw no new light upon her husband's conduct. What reason could he have for grief or regret, if he loved her? Never had fortune smiled more kindly upon man and wife than upon these two.

She looked back upon the days of their brief courtship, and remembered many things which favoured the idea that he had never really loved her, that he had been actuated by mercenary considerations alone. She remembered how cold a lover he had been, how seldom he had courted her confidence, how little he had told of his own life, how glad he had always seemed of Celia's company, frivolous and even fatiguing as that young lady's conversation was apt to be. It was all too clear. She had been duped and fooled by this man to whom she had so freely given her heart, from whom she had asked nothing but candour and plain dealing. She lived through that hour of waiting somehow. It was the longest hour she had ever known. Her maid came to attend to the fire, and light the candles on dressing table and mantel-piece, and lingered a little, pretending to be busied about the trunks and travelling bags, expecting her mistress to talk to her, and then departed softly, to go back to the revellers in the housekeeper's room, where the atmosphere was heavily charged with tea and buttered toast, and to tell them how dull the bride

looked, and how she had sat like a statue and said never a word.

'Who was it went out at the front door just now?' asked the old butler, looking up from a cup of tea which he had been gently fanning with his breath. 'I heard it shut to.'

'It must 'ave bin Mr. Treverton,' said Mary, Laura's maid. 'I met 'im in the 'all. I dessay he were goin' out to smoke his cigar. It was too dark for me to see his face, but he didn't walk as gay and light as a gentleman ought on his wedding day, to my mind,' added Mary with authority.

"Well, I dunno,' remarked Mr. Trimmer, the butler, solemnly. 'Perhaps a wedding aint altogether the comfortablest day in a man's life. There's too many eyes upon him. He feels as he's the objick of everybody's notice, and if he's a delicate minded man it kind of preys upon him. I can quite understand Mr. Treverton's not feeling quite himself to-day. And then you see he come's into the estate by a fluke, as you may say, and he ain't got it yet, and he won't feel himself independent

till the year's out, and the property is 'anded over to him.'

Mr. Trimmer did not drop his aspirates habitually, like Mary; he only let one slip now and then when he was impressive.

The hour was ended. For the last twenty minutes Laura had been sitting with her watch in her hand. Now she rose with her heart beating tumultuously, and went quickly down the wide old staircase, hastening to hear her husband's explanation of his extraordinary conduct. He had promised to explain.

Had she not been very foolish in torturing herself for this last hour with vain endeavours to fathom the mystery?

Had she not been still more foolish when she jumped at conclusions, and made up her mind that John Treverton did not love her? There might be twenty other reasons for his grief, she told herself, now that the hour of suspense was ended, and that she was going to hear his explanation.

She trembled as she drew near the door, and felt as if in another moment she might stumble

and fall fainting on the threshold. She was approaching the most critical moment of her life, the very turning point of her destiny. All must depend upon what John Treverton had to say to her in the next few minutes. She opened the door and went in, breathless, incapable of speech. She felt that she could ask him no questions, she could only stand there and listen to all he had to tell.

The room was empty, Laura could just see as much as that in the fitful glow of the fire; and then a jet of flame leaped suddenly out of the dimness like a living thing, and showed her a letter lying on the table. He had written to her. That which he had to tell was too terrible for speech, and he had, therefore, written. Hope and comfort died within her at the sight of that letter. She hurried back to her dressing-room, where she had left the candles burning, locked herself in, and then, standing, faint and still trembling, by the mantel-piece, she tore open the envelope and read her husband's letter,

'DEAREST AND EVER DEAREST,—

'When this letter is in your hands I shall

have left you, in all probability for a long time, perhaps for ever. I love you as dearly, as fondly, as passionately as ever man loved woman, and the pain of leaving you is worse than the pain of death. Life is not so sweet to me as you are. This world holds no other delight for me but your sweet company, your heavenly love; yet I, the most miserable of men, must forego both.

'Dearest, I have done a shameful and perhaps a foolish act. I have committed a crime in order to bind your life with mine, somehow, in the rash hope that some day that bond may be made legal and complete. Two ends are served by this act of mine. I have won you from all other men—John Treverton's wife will have no suitor—and I have secured you the possession of your old home and your adopted father's fortune. His desire is at least realized by this sad and broken wedding of ours.

'Dearest love, I must leave you, because there is an old tie which forbids me as a man of honour to be more to you than I now am. Your husband in name; your defender and champion,

if need were, before all the world; your adoring slave, in secret and in absence, to the day of my death. If Fate prove kind, this bond of which I speak will not last for ever. My fetters will fall off some day, and I shall return to you a free man. Oh, my love, pity and forgive me, keep a place in your heart for me always, and believe that in acting as I have acted I have been prompted by love alone. I shall not touch a sixpence of my cousin's fortune till I can come back to you, a free man, and receive wealth and happiness from you. Till then you will be sole mistress of Hazlehurst Manor, and all that goes with it. Mr. Sampson will tell you what settlement I have made —a settlement that will be duly executed by me upon the day on which I become the ostensible owner of my cousin Jasper's estate.

'My beloved, I can say no more; I dare reveal no more. If you deign to think at all of one who has so deceived you, think of me pityingly as the most deeply wretched of men. Forgive me if you can; and I dare even to hope for pardon from the infinite goodness of your nature.

It is sweet to me in my misery to know that you bear my name—that there is a link between us that can never be broken, even though Fate should be cruel enough to part us for life. But I hope for better things from destiny; I hope for, and look forward to a time when I shall sign myself, with pride and gladness more intense than the pain I feel to-day, your loving husband,

'JOHN TREVERTON.'

She stood for some minutes pale as marble, with the letter in her hand, and then she lifted the senseless paper to her lips, and kissed it passionately.

'He loves me,' she cried involuntarily. 'Thank God for that. I can bear anything now I am sure of that.'

She believed implicitly in the letter. A woman with wider knowledge of the evil things of this world might have seen only a tissue of lies in these wild lines of John Treverton's; but to Laura they meant truth and truth alone. He had acted very wickedly; but he loved her. He had done her almost the deepest wrong a man

could do to a woman; but he loved her. He had duped and fooled her, made her ridiculous in the sight of her friends and acquaintance; but he loved her. That one virtue in him almost atoned for all his crimes.

'There's not the least use in my trying to hate him,' she told herself, in piteous self-abasement, 'for I love him with all my heart and soul. I suppose I am a mean-spirited young woman, a poor creature, for I cannot leave off loving him, though he has treated me very cruelly, and almost broken my heart.'

She locked the letter in the secret drawer of her dressing case, and then sat down on a low stool by the fire and wept very quietly over this new, strange sorrow.

'Celia was right,' she said to herself, by-and-bye, with a bitter smile. 'It was an ill-omened marriage. She need not have taken so much trouble about my collars and cuffs.'

And then later she began to think of the difficulties, the absurdity of her position.

'Wife and widow,' she thought, 'with a hus-

band who ran away from me on my wedding day. How am I to account to the world for his conduct? What a foolish, miserable creature I shall appear.'

It came suddenly into her mind that she could not endure, not yet awhile, at any rate, to have to explain her husband's conduct—to give some reason for his desertion of her. Anything would be better than that. She must run away somewhere. She must leave the revelation to time. It would be easier for her to write to her old friend the vicar from a distance.

She could bear anything rather than to be cross-examined by Celia, who had always distrusted John Treverton, and who might be secretly elated at his having proved himself an impostor.

'I must go away at once,' she decided; 'this very night. I must go for my honeymoon alone.'

She rang, and Mary came quickly, flushed with tea, buttered toast, and the hilarity below stairs.

'What time is the carriage to come for us, Mary?' asked Mrs. Treverton.

'At a quarter to eight ma'am. The mail goes at twenty minutes before nine.'

'And it is just half-past six. Mary, do you think you could get ready to go with me in an hour and a quarter?'

It had been arranged that Laura was to travel without a maid, much to the disappointment of Mary, who had an ardent desire to see foreign lands.

'Lor, ma'am, I haven't a thing packed; but I should dearly like to go. Do you really mean it?'

'I do mean it, and I shall be very much pleased with you if you'll contrive to pack your trunk in time to go with me.'

'I'll do it, ma'am,' cried Mary, clasping her hands in ecstacy, and then she tore down-stairs like a mad thing to announce to the assembly in the housekeeper's room that she was going to France with her mistress.

'That's a sudden change,' said the butler. 'And where's Mr. Treverton all this time? He didn't ought to be out of doors in the dark, smoking his cigar, instead of keeping his wife company.'

'No more he didn't,' said Mary, with indignation, 'he ain't my notion of a 'usband, leaving her to mope alone on her wedding day, poor dear. It's my belief she'd been crying her eyes out just now, tho' she was artful enough to keep her face turned away from me while she spoke. I dessay she's made up her mind to take me abroad with her for company, because she feels she'll be dull and lonesome with 'im.'

'You'd better go and pack up your box,' said the housekeeper, 'and not stand gossiping there. What do you know of the ways of gentry, married or single, I should like to know? When you've been in service as long as I have you may talk.'

'Well, I'm sure,' cried Mary, indignantly, and then she expressed a hope that her soul was her own, even at Hazlehurst Manor.

Before half-past seven, Mary had packed her box, and had it conveyed to the hall. Mrs. Treverton's trunks and bags had also been brought down. At a quarter to eight the carriage drove up to the door, an old-fashioned landau in which

Jasper Treverton used to take his daily airing, drawn by a pair of big horses that had begun life at the plough. Since the lamps had been lighted no one had seen the bridegroom. The tea things had been taken into the book room, and the urn had hissed itself to silence, but no one had come there to take tea. Laura only came downstairs when the carriage was at the door.

'Joe, run and look for Mr. Treverton,' cried the butler to his underling.

'Mr. Treverton will meet us at the station,' Laura said, hurriedly; and then she got into the carriage, and called to Mary to follow her.

'Tell Berrows to drive quickly to the station,' she told the butler, and at the first crack of the whip the over-fed horses swung the big carriage round, as if they meant to annihilate the good old house, and went off along the avenue with the noise of a Barclay and Perkins dray.

'Well, I never did!' exclaimed the housekeeper. 'Fancy his meeting her at the station, instead of their going off together, sitting side by side, like true lovers.'

'I'm afraid there's not much true love about it, Martha,' said her husband, sententiously, and then, waxing familiar, he said, 'When you and me was married we didn't manage matters so, did we my lass?'

CHAPTER XIII.

THE SETTLEMENT.

LAURA had been married three weeks and a day, and the new year was just three weeks old. It was a very ailing and ungenial year in this infantine stage of its existence. There had been hardly a day of pleasant weather since its birth, nothing but rain and sleet, and damp raw cold, and morning mists and evening fogs. It was not a good, honest, old-fashioned winter, such as we read of in story books, and enjoy about once in a decade. It was simply obnoxious, ill-conditioned weather, characteristic of no particular season.

It was just a day after the anniversary of Jasper Treverton's death, and Tom Sampson was meditating in a lazy, comfortable way, on his former client, as he sat by the office fire sipping his tea, which he had desired to be brought to him in his den, as he was so terribly busy. He had not dipped a pen

in the ink yet, and it was half-past nine o'clock; but it was not for Eliza Sampson to know this. She was always taught to believe that when her brother spent his evenings in the office he was working severely—'double tides,' he called it. If she came in to look at him she found him scratching away violently with a quill that tore shrieking along the paper, like an express train rushing through a village station; and it was not for her to know that Thomas snatched up his pen and put on this appearance of industry when he heard her gentle footfall at his door. Domestic life is made up of such small secrets.

To-night Tom Sampson was in a particularly lazy humour. He was getting a rich man, not by large earnings but by small expenditure, and life, which is an insoluble problem for many, was as easy for him as one of those nine elementary axioms in Euclid that seem too foolishly obvious to engage the reasoning power of the smallest schoolboy, such as—'if equals be taken from equals the remainders are equal,' and so on. Tom was thinking that he ought to be thinking about

marrying. He was not in love, and never had been since he exchanged his schoolboy jacket for a tail-coat; but he told himself that the time had come when he might prudently allow himself to fall in love. He would love not too well, but wisely.

'Lizzie is a good girl, and she knows my ways,' he said to himself, 'but she's getting old maidish, and that's a fault which will grow upon her. Yes, decidedly, it is time I thought of a wife. A man's choice is confoundedly limited in such a hole as this. I don't want to marry a farmer's daughter, though I might get a fine, healthy young women, and a tidy little bit of money, if I could please myself among the agricultural class; but Tom Sampson has his failings, and pride is one of 'em. I should like my wife to be a cut above me. There's Celia Clare, now. She's more the kind of thing I should fancy; plump and pretty, with nice, lively ways. I've had a little too much of the sentimental from poor Lizzie. Yes, I might do worse than marry Celia. And I think she likes me.'

Mr. Sampson's meditations were interrupted at this point by the sound of a footstep on the sloshy gravel walk outside his office door. There was a half-glass door opening into the garden, as well as the door opening from the passage, which was the formal approach for Mr. Sampson's clients. Only his intimates entered by the garden door, and he was unable to imagine who his late visitor could be.

'Ten o'clock,' he said to himself. 'It must be something particular. Old Pulsby has got another attack of gout in the stomach, perhaps, and wants to alter his will. He always alters his will when he gets a sharp attack. The pain makes him so savage that it's a relief to him to disinherit somebody.'

Mr. Sampson speculated thus as he undrew the bolt and opened the glass door. The man who stood before him was no messenger from old Pulsby, but John Treverton, clad in a white mackintosh, from which the water ran in little rills.

'Is it yourself or your ghost?' asked Sampson, falling back to let his client enter.

The question was not without reason. John Treverton's face was as white as his raiment, and the combined effect of the pale, haggard face and the long white coat was altogether spectral.

'Flesh and blood, my dear Sampson, I assure you,' replied the other coolly, as he divested himself of his mackintosh, and took up his stand in front of the comfortable fire, 'flesh and blood frozen to the bone.'

'I thought you were in the south of France.'

'It doesn't matter what you thought, you see I am here. Yesterday put me in legal possession of my cousin's estate. I have come to execute the deed of settlement. It's all ready, of course.'

'It's ready, yes; but I didn't think you'd be in such a hurry. I should have thought you would have stopped to finish your honeymoon.'

'My honeymoon is of very little importance compared with my wife's future welfare. Come, Sampson, look sharp. Who's to witness my signature?'

'My sister and one of the servants can do that.'

'Call them in, then. I'm ready to sign.'

'Hadn't you better read the deed first.'

'Well, yes, perhaps. One can't be too careful. I want my wife's position to be unassailable as the summit of Mount Everest. You have taken counsel's opinion, and the deed will hold water?'

'It would hold the Atlantic. Your gift is so entirely simple, that there could be no difficulty in wording the deed. You give your wife everything. I think you a fool, so did the advising counsel; but that makes no difference.'

'Not a whit.'

John Treverton sat down at the office table and read the deed of settlement from the first word to the last. He gave to his dear wife, Laura Treverton, all the property, real and personal, of which he stood possessed, for her sole and separate use. There was a good deal of legal jargon, but the drift of the deed was clear enough.

'I am ready,' said John.

Mr. Sampson rang the bell for the servant, and shouted into the passage for his sister. Eliza came running in, and at sight of John Treverton's pale, face, screamed, and made as if she would have fainted.

'Gracious, Mr. Treverton,' she gasped, 'I thought there were oceans between us. What in mercy's name has happened?'

'Nothing alarming. I have only come to execute my marriage settlement, which I was not in a position to make till yesterday.'

'How dreadful for poor Mrs. Treverton to be left alone in a foreign land!'

John Treverton did not notice this speech. He dipped his pen in the ink, and signed the paper, while Miss Sampson and Sophia, the housemaid, looked on wonderingly.

'Sophia, run and get a pair of sheets aired, and get the spare room ready,' cried Eliza, when she had affixed her signature as witness. 'Of course you are going to stop with us, Mr. Treverton?'

'You are very kind. No, I must get away immediately. I have a trap waiting to take me back to the station. Oh, by-the-way, Sampson, about that money you kindly advanced to me. It must come out of the estate somehow; I suppose you can manage that?'

'Yes, I think I can manage that,' answered Sampson modestly. 'Do you want any further advance?'

'No, the estate belongs to my wife, now. I must not tamper with it.'

'And what's hers is yours of course. Well, I congratulate you with all my heart. You are the luckiest fellow I ever knew, bar none. A handsome wife, and a handsome fortune. What more can a man ask from Fate?'

'Not much, certainly,' said John Treverton, 'but I must catch the last up-train. Good-night.'

'Going back to the South of France?'

John Treverton did not wait to answer the question. He shook hands hastily with Eliza, and dashed out into the garden. A minute afterwards Mr. Sampson and his sister heard the crack of a whip, and the sound of wheels upon the high road.

'Did you ever see such a volcanic individual?' exclaimed the solicitor, folding up the deed of settlement.

'I am afraid he is not happy,' sighed Eliza.

'I am afraid he is mad,' said Tom.

CHAPTER XIV.

'YOU HAVE BUT TO SAY THE WORD.'

Mr. Smolendo was in his glory. In the words of his friends and followers he was coining money. He was a man to be cultivated and revered. A man for whom champagne suppers or dinners at Richmond were as nothing; a man for whom it was easier to lend a five-pound note than it is for the common ruck of humanity to advance half-a-crown. Flatterers fawned upon him, intimate acquaintances hung fondly upon him, reminding him pathetically that they knew him twenty years ago, when he hadn't a sixpence, as if that knowledge of byegone adversity were a merit and a claim. A man of smaller mind might have had his mental equilibrium shaken by all this adulation. Mr. Smolendo was a man of granite, and took it for what it was worth. When people were particularly civil, he knew they wanted something from him.

'The lessee of a London theatre is not a man to be easily had,' he said; 'he sees human nature on the ugliest side.'

Christmas had come and gone, the New Year was six weeks old, and Mr. Smolendo's prosperity continued without abatement. The theatre was nightly crowded to suffocation. There were morning performances every Saturday. Stalls and boxes were booked a month in advance.

'La Chicot is a little gold mine,' said Mr Smolendo's followers.

Yes, La Chicot had the credit of it all. Mr. Smolendo had produced a grand fairy spectacle, in which La Chicot was the central figure. She appeared in half-a-dozen costumes, all equally original, expensive, and audacious. She was a fountain of golden water, draped exclusively in dazzling golden fringe, a robe of light, through which her finely sculptured form flashed now and then, as the glittering fringe parted for an instant, like a revelation of the beautiful. She was a fish-woman in a scanty satin kirtle, scarlet stockings, and a high cap of finest Brussels lace. She

was a bayadère, a debardeur, a wood nymph, an odalisque. She did not dance as she danced before her accident, but she was as beautiful as ever, and a trifle more impudent. She had learnt enough English to speak the lines of her part, and her accent gave a charm and a quaintness to the performance. She sang a comic song with more chic than melody, and was applauded to the echo. The critics told her she had ascended to a higher grade in the drama. La Chicot told herself that she was the greatest woman in London, as well as the handsomest. She lived in a circle of which she herself was the centre. The circumference was a ring of admirers. There was no world beyond.

Something to this effect she told her fellow lodger, Mr. Desrolles, one grey afternoon in February, when he dropped in to beg a glass of brandy, in order to stave off one of those attacks he so often talked about. She was always particular friendly with the 'Second Floor,' as it was the fashion of the house to call this gentleman. He flattered and amused her, fetched and carried

for her, and sometimes kept her company when she was in too low spirits to drink alone.

'My good creature, you oughtn't to live in such a hole as this. Upon my soul, you ought not,' said Desrolles, with an air that was half-protection, half-patronage.

'I know I ought not,' replied La Chicot. 'There is not an actress in Paris who would not call me stupid as an owl for my pains. *Que diable*, I sacrifice myself for the honour of a husband who mocks himself of me, who amuses himself elsewhere, and leaves me to fret and pine alone. It is too much. See then, Desrolles, it may be that you think I boast myself when I tell you that one of the richest men in London is over head and ears in love with me. See, here are his letters. Read them, and see how much I have refused.'

She opened a work-basket on the table, and from a chaos of reels of cotton, tapes and buttons, and shreds and patches, extracted half-a-dozen letters, which she tossed across the table to Desrolles.

'Do you leave your love-letters where your husband might so easily find them?' asked Desrolles, wonderfully.

'Do you suppose he would give himself the trouble to look at them?' she cried, scornfully. 'Not he. He has so long left off caring for me himself that he never supposes that anybody else can fall in love with me. Help yourself to that cognac, Monsieur Desrolles. It is the only safe drink in this miserable climate of yours; and put some coals on the fire, *mon bonhomme*. I am frozen to the marrow of my bones.'

La Chicot filled her glass by way of setting a good example, and emptied it as placidly as if the brandy had been sugar and water.

Desrolles looked over the letters she had handed him. They all went to the same tune. They told La Chicot that she was beautiful, and that the writer was madly in love with her. They offered her a carriage, a house in Mayfair, a settlement. The offers rose in value with the lapse of time.

'How have you answered him?' asked Desrolles, curious and interested.

'Not at all. I knew better how to make myself valued. Let him wait for his answer."

'A man must be very hard hit to write like that,' suggested the gentleman.

La Chicot shrugged her statuesque shoulders. She was lovely even in her more than careless attire. She wore a long loose dressing-gown of scarlet cashmere, girdled with a cord and tassels, which she tied and untied, and twisted and untwisted in sheer idleness. Her massy hair was rolled in a great rough knob at the back of her head, ready to escape from the comb and slide down her back at the slightest provocation. The dead white of her complexion showed like marble against the scarlet robe, the dense hair showed raven black above the pale brow and large luminous eyes.

'Is he as rich as he pretends to be?' asked La Chicot, thoughtfully swinging the heavy scarlet tassel, and lazily contemplating the fire.

'To my certain knowledge,' said Mr. Desrolles, with an oracular air, 'Joseph Lemuel is one of the wealthiest men in London.'

'I don't see that it much matters,' said La Chicot, meditatively. 'I like money, but so long as I have enough to buy what I want, it's all that I care about, and I don't like that grim-looking Jew.'

'Compare a house in Mayfair with this den,' urged Desrolles.

"Where is Mayfair?'

Desrolles described the neighbourhood.

'A wilderness of dull streets,' said La Chicot, with a contemptuous shrug. 'What is one street better than another? I should like a house in the Champs Elysées—a house in a garden, dazzling white, all over flowers, with big shining windows, and a Swiss stable.'

'A house like a toy,' said Desrolles. 'Well, Lemuel could buy you one as easily as I could buy you a handful of sugar plums. You have but to say the word.'

'It is a word that I shall never say,' exclaimed La Chicot, decisively. 'I am an honest woman. And then, I am too proud.'

Desrolles wondered whether it was pride, virtue,

or rank obstinacy which made La Chicot reject such brilliant offers. It was not easy for him to believe in virtue, masculine or feminine. He had not travelled by those paths in which the virtues grow and flourish, but he had made intimate acquaintance with the vices. Since a certain interview with La Chicot's husband, in which he had promised to keep a paternal eye upon the lady, Mr. Desrolles had wound himself completely into the wife's confidence. He had made himself alike useful and agreeable. Though she kept her wealthy adorer at arm's length, she liked to talk of him. The hot-house flowers he sent her adorned her table, and looked strangely out of place in the tawdry, littered room, where yesterday's dust was generally left to be swept away to-morrow.

One thing La Chicot did not know, and that was that Mr. Desrolles had made the acquaintance of her admirer, and was being paid by Mr. Lemuel to plead his cause.

'You seem to be better off than you used to be, my friend,' she said to him one day. 'Unless I deceive myself that is a new coat.'

'Yes,' answered the man of the world, without blushing. 'I have been dabbling a little on the Stock Exchange, and have had better luck than usual.'

Desrolles stirred the heaped-up coals into a blaze, and filled himself a third glass of cognac.

'It's as fine as a liqueur,' he said, smacking his lips. 'It would be a sin to dilute such stuff. By-the-way, when do you expect your husband?'

'I never expect him,' answered La Chicot. 'He goes and comes as he chooses. He is like the wandering Jew.'

'He is gone to Paris on business, I suppose?'

'On business or pleasure. I neither know nor care which. He earns his living. Those ridiculous pictures of his please both in London and Paris. See here!'

She tossed him over a crumpled heap of comic papers, English and French. Her husband's name figured in all, affixed to the wildest caricatures—scenes theatrical and Bohemian, sketches full of life and humour.

'To judge from those you would suppose he was rather a cheerful companion,' said La Chicot, 'and yet he is more dismal than a funeral.'

'He vents all his cheerfulness on his wood blocks,' suggested Desrolles.

Of late Jack Chicot had been a restless wanderer, spending very little of his life in the Cibber Street lodging. There was not even the pretence of union between his wife and him, and there never had been since La Chicot's recovery. They were civil to each other, for the most part; but there were times when the wife's tongue grew bitter, and her evil temper flashed out like a thin thread of forked lightning cleaving a dark summer sky. The husband was always civil. La Chicot could not exasperate him into retaliation.

'You hate me too much to lose your temper with me,' she said to him one day in the presence of the landlady; 'you are afraid to trust yourself. If you gave way for a moment you might kill me. The temptation would be too strong for you.'

Jack Chicot said never a word, but stood with his arms folded, smiling at her, heaven knows how bitterly.

One day she stung him into speech.

'You are in love with some other woman,' she cried. 'I know it.'

'I have seen a woman who is not like you,' he answered with a sigh.

'And you are in love with her.'

'For her unlikeness to you? That would be a charm, certainly.'

'Go to her. Go to your ——'

The sentence ended in a foul epithet—one of the poison-flowers of Parisian argot.

'The journey is too long,' he said. 'It is not easy to travel from hell to heaven.'

Jack Chicot had been once to the Prince Frederick Theatre since his wife's return to the stage. He went on the first night of the grand spectacular burlesque which had brought Mr. Smolendo so much money. He sat looking on with a grave unchanging face while the audience round him grinned in ecstacy; and when La Chicot asked his opinion of the performance, he openly expressed his disgust.

'Are not my costumes beautiful,' she asked.

'Very. But I should prefer a little less beauty and a little more decency.'

The rest of the audience were easier to please. They saw no indecency in the dresses. No doubt they saw what they had paid to see, and that contented them.

Never had woman more of her own way than La Chicot after that wonderful recovery of hers. She went where she liked, drank as much as she liked, spent every sixpence of her liberal salary on her own pleasure, and was held accountable by no one. Her husband was a husband only in name. She saw more of Desrolles than of Jack Chicot.

There was only one person who ever ventured to reprove or expostulate with her, and that was the man who had saved her life, at so large a sacrifice of time and care. George Gerard called upon her now and then, and spoke to her plainly.

'You have been drinking again,' he would say, while they were shaking hands.

'I have had nothing since last night, when I took a glass of champagne with my supper'

'You mean a bottle; and you have had half

a bottle of brandy this morning to correct the champagne.'

She no longer attempted to deny the impeachment.

'Well, why should I not drink?' she exclaimed defiantly. 'Who cares what becomes of me?'

'I care: I have saved your life once, against long odds. You owe me something for that. But I cannot save you if you make up your mind to drink yourself to death. Brandy is a slow suicide, but for a woman of your temperament it's as certain as prussic acid.'

Upon this La Chicot would dissolve in maudlin tears. It was a pitiful sight, and wrung the student's heart. He could have loved her so well, would have tried so hard to save her, had it been possible. He did not know how heartless a piece of beautiful clay she was. He put down her errors to her husband's neglect.

'If she had been my wife she might have been a very different woman,' he said to himself, not believing the innate depravity of anything so absolutely beautiful as La Chicot.

He forgot how fair some poisonous weeds are, how beautiful the scarlet berries of the nightshade look when they star the brown autumn hedges.

So La Chicot went her way triumphantly. There was no danger to life or limb for her in the new piece—no perilous ascent to the sky borders. She drank as much brandy as she liked, and, so long as she contrived to appear sober before the audience, Mr. Smolendo said nothing.

'I'm afraid she'll drink herself into a dropsy, poor thing,' he said compassionately one day to a friend at the Garrick Club. 'But I hope she'll last my time. A woman of her type could hardly be expected to draw for more than three seasons, and La Chicot ought to hold out for another year or so.'

'After that, the hospital,' said his friend.

Mr. Smolendo shrugged his shoulders.

'I never trouble myself about the after-career of my artists,' he answered pleasantly.

END OF VOL. I.

J. AND W. RIDER, PRINTERS, LONDON.